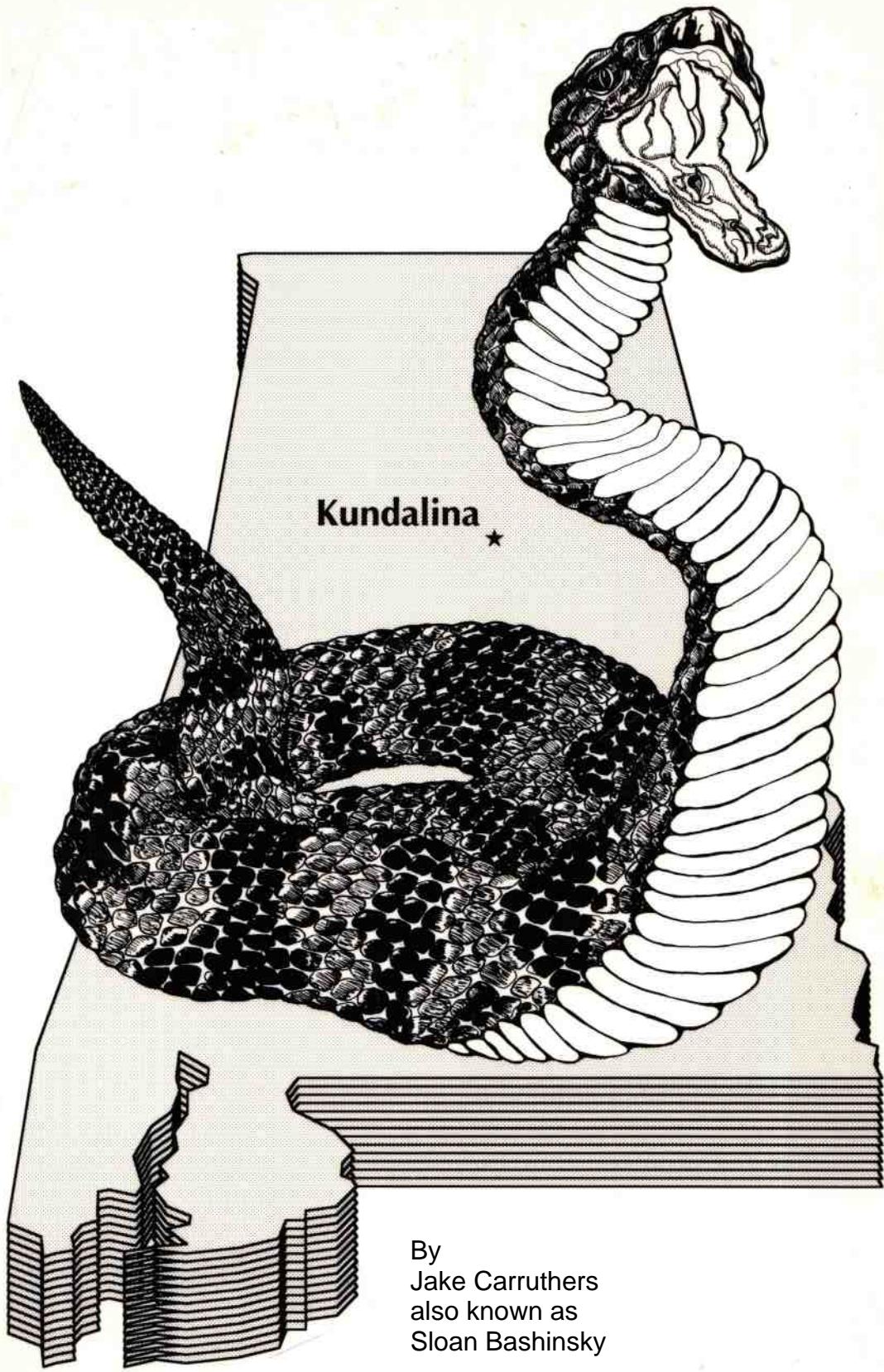
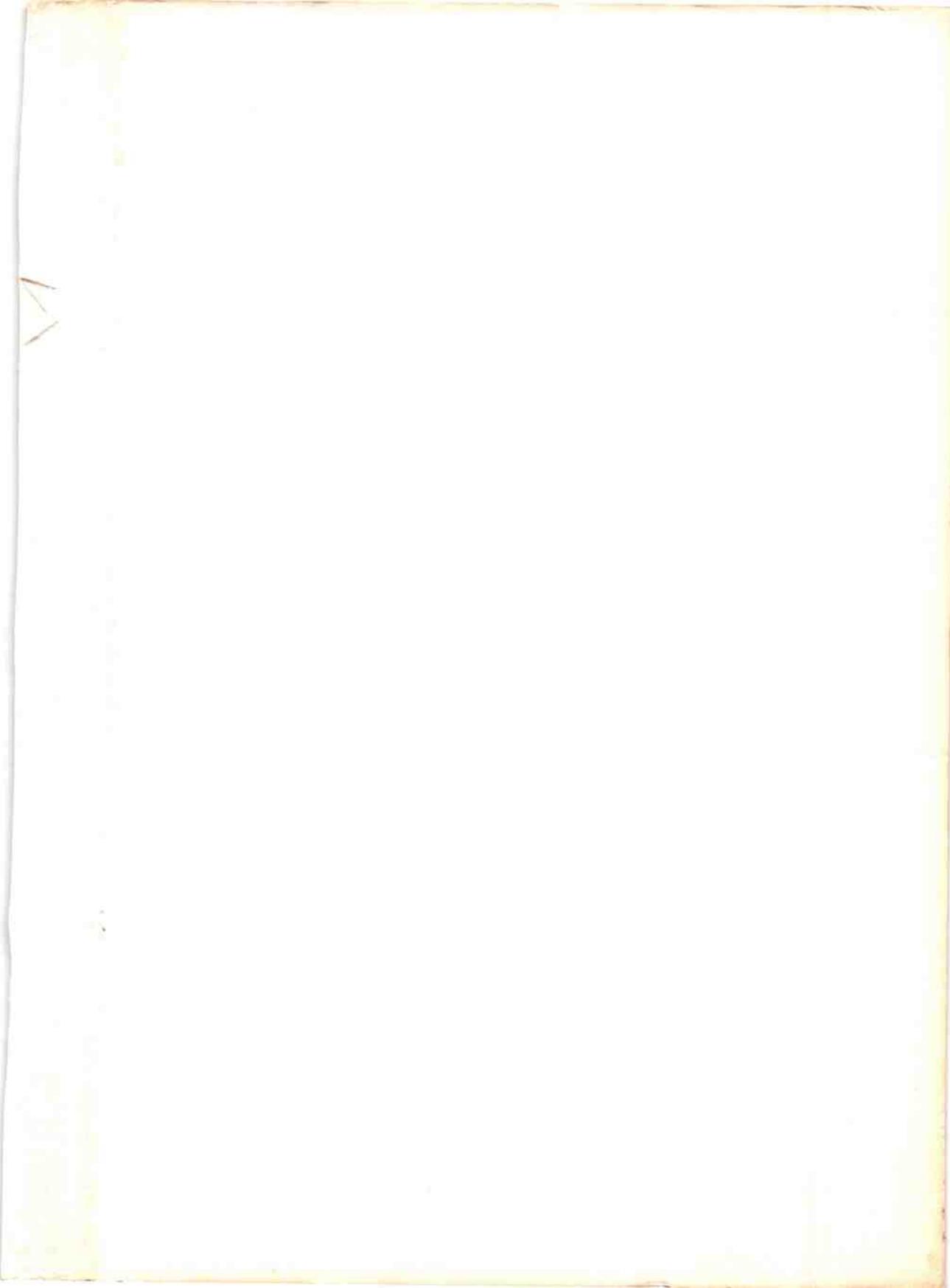


KUNDALINA, ALABAMA
(A Strange Tale)

Jake Carruthers



By
Jake Carruthers
also known as
Sloan Bashinsky



Kundalina, Alabama

(A Strange Tale)

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To Rose

Invocation

This tale—for it really is that and not a novel—is about Alabama, the “Heart of Dixie,” as it is called by people from those parts. None of this book is true except the parts you believe are true. A real person didn’t write this book because no real person would be *that* crazy. So if you think you know a real person who wrote it, then forget that nonsense right away. Or at the very least, keep your opinion to yourself to protect the family of the real person you think wrote it.

Contents

	Howdy!.....	3
1	Strange Beginning.....	9
2	Mary Lou	14
3	Rose.....	25
4	The Tiny Kingdom	34
5	Roland	40
6	Sudden Change.....	45
7	Communion	55
8	Weenie Mania	58
9	The Lady.....	67
10	Kindred Spirits.....	74
11	Lawyers	79
12	Psychiatrists	85
13	Ministers.....	92
14	Amazing Grace.....	105
15	Breaking Free	110
16	The Send-Off.....	118
17	The Steeple Chase.....	120
18	Defrocked	127
19	The Plains.....	133
20	Nam.....	143
21	The Mockingbird	151
22	Disposable Church.....	158
23	Attitude Adjustment.....	166
24	Lynch Mobs	172
25	Revelations.....	185
26	Heartblood	198
	Parting Words	205

Howdy!

Kundalina? you ask? Where and what in God's name is Kundalina?

Well, when I, Riley Strange, was just a kid, Kundalina—which rhymes with Carolina—was a sleepy little town south of Birmingham, split in two by the Cahaba River, a wild and scenic river long before such designations were made by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Back then, if you wanted to impress how far out in the sticks somebody lived, you said, "That sonofabitch lives way out in Ishkooda." Although I never met anybody who had been to Ishkooda, much less actually lived there, almost everybody I knew talked about how far away it was as if they had personally been there.

Or if you wanted to insinuate that someone had Negro lineage, then you said, "You're from Powderly," the town with the first Negro golf course in the Birmingham area. Powderly was next to Ishkooda, just a little south of Bessemer, all lying to the west of Birmingham.

Bessemer was home to the Bright Star Cafe, just about the best restaurant around in those days. It was run by a Greek family, as were most of the good restaurants around Birmingham back then. Bessemer's other claim to fame was that it was not part of Birmingham. In fact, Bessemer wasn't part of anything but itself, but that's an altogether different story that might someday be written.

And if your point was to talk about how red a person's neck was, then you said, "That hick must be from New Merkle." The eighth-grade New Merkle boys all talked real hicky, had buck teeth if they were lucky, no front teeth if they were unlucky, had hair under their arms, and shaved and looked sixteen. Actually, most of them *were* sixteen. They had to work half the year to help support their poor families, and that kept them behind in school.

But if your point was to say just about the most awful thing you could about another person, worse than calling his mother a loose woman or his father a yellow-bellied coward, then you would say, "That jerk's from Kundalina." I mean, there wasn't anything worse than getting accused of being from Kundalina except for actually being from there and having somebody else know about it.

We got ragged something awful from kids who lived in other Birmingham communities about how much Kundalina sounded like "vagina." Even worse, they accused us of eating gummy old carp and suckers right out of the Cahaba River, and everybody knew what carp and suckers ate: garbage, fish shit and the slimy algae that thrived on the aforementioned.

"You vagina sucker," "You stinking carp head," "You fish fucker," and other endearing phrases still ring in my ears. I never knew anyone who had eaten a carp or sucker, much less had sex with one. We caught plenty of them, though, on trot lines baited with dough balls, to put under our rose bushes that produced blue ribbon winning roses each year at the Alabama State Fair.

Even better, decomposing suckers and carp were great fun to throw at cars racing along U.S. 280. I mean to say, a ripe two-pound sucker left a beautiful impression on the hood of a Ford or Chevy traveling at sixty miles an hour, and a juicy five-pound carp—well, it took weeks for the neighborhood cats to pick one of those beauties out of

the grill of a Cadillac or Lincoln Continental. We only threw carp at the bigger, more expensive cars, the ones usually driven by people from over the mountain—Mt. Brook, Homewood and Vestavia.

The mountain I refer to here is "Red Mountain," actually nothing more than a big hill running northeast to southwest through Birmingham, the tail-end of the Appalachian Mountains where once nestled huge deposits of iron ore and coal upon which Birmingham's industrial base had been built. By the time I was born in 1943, the iron ore and coal were mined out and all that was left to remind of those finite geological riches were Vulcan and the red rocks exposed at the Red Mountain cut on U.S. 31 that connected Birmingham with Homewood to the south.

Vulcan was a huge, cast-iron statue of a muscular blacksmith wearing nothing but his smitty's apron. He was mounted on a stone tower over the Red Mountain cut, and I have heard it said that Vulcan was the largest cast-iron statue in the world. He faced Birmingham, his left hand holding his hammer resting on an anvil, his right an electric torch to the sky. The torch burned green every night except after someone was killed in an automobile accident, and on those nights it burned red.

I suppose the fact that Vulcan's bare behind faced south proved that the people of Birmingham felt pretty much the same way that people from Kundalina did about over-the-mountain people.

That reminds me to tell you about what was probably the most fun thing we did with Kundalina carp and suckers. We wrapped them tight in wax paper and put them in a box like the kind you get from mail order houses. Then we caught a ride into downtown Birmingham and mailed our stinky presents from the main post office to Mt. Brook homes where the richest people of all lived. We got addresses out of the telephone book. All the Mt. Brook phone numbers began with the number 2, and later

with 871, so we knew from the prefix what addresses were in Mt. Brook. That was before zip codes.

If we felt really mean, we used New Merkle, Ishkooda, or Powderly return addresses, but usually we just wrote something like "Bromberg's Jewelry Co." or "Black's Clothing Store" for the return address. That was where most of the Mt. Brookies shopped back in those days, so they expected to get packages from those places anyway, just not ones containing the rank enclosures we gleefully provided.

Even after the pollution came down from the upriver developments backed by Mt. Brook money, our carp and suckers held their own against the onslaught until the Alabama Fish and Wildlife Service found out about them in 1972. That led to a five-year study to see if Kundalina carp and suckers could be bred in a hatchery and shipped all over the state to clean up other polluted rivers and lakes. But it was not to be.

Whenever Kundalina carp and suckers were transplanted, they started acting just like all the other carp and suckers, lying around and shitting more than they ate, thereby making matters worse—just like the hungry kudzu vine imported from China to serve as ground cover, taking over the very ground it was supposed to protect, then the shrubs and trees, too.

Kudzu was good only for goat food and for making compost that grew tomato plants as high as medium-sized pine trees and pumpkins so big that just one would fill up the back of a pickup truck. Our produce entries in the annual contests at the state fair were so much bigger than all the other entries that the judges finally quit letting us compete. They said we used some kind of magic—that it wasn't fair.

Anyhow, once the state government got to messing around in the Cahaba River, something happened to our Kundalina carp and suckers. They finally took over the

river like the kudzu growing along its banks took over the land, so thick in places that you could hardly help but snag a carp or sucker as you fished for bass. Before long, our beautiful Cahaba River started smelling like those presents the Mt. Brook folks got. I guess we deserved it after what we had done to them.

As you may have already guessed, there was more to Kundalina than met the eye. If the real truth about Kundalina ever got out back in those days, the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce would have had a lot more to worry about than its police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Conner, using fire hoses and German police dogs on black people demonstrating for their inalienable right to be treated like ordinary human beings.

In fact, the pious city fathers, all of whom lived over the mountain and outside the Birmingham city limits but maintained their businesses in downtown Birmingham, would very likely have been forced to hire a fancy New York public relations firm to convince the rest of the country that, not only was the truth about Kundalina not the truth at all, but that the place was only called Kundalina because in the old days—before Earl Warren and Alabama's own Hugo Black were appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court—the "nigras" always said of Kundalina, "It's kinda down on de line," meaning the county line between Jefferson and Shelby counties.

The people in Kundalina who knew better were glad most people thought that way. But I'm way getting ahead of myself here, telling this before you even know what happened one night when I was twelve, because it was then that I first realized there was something really strange going on. What it was, I didn't rightly know for sure, but that it was strange—well I knew that as sure as I know I'm telling you this story.



Strange Beginning

Nearly every Sunday Grandma took me into Birmingham to catch a matinee and then have dinner at Britling's Cafeteria on Third Avenue North next to the Melba Theater. I usually got roast beef, mashed potatoes, pole beans, biscuits and apple pie, except sometimes I had fried chicken instead of roast beef.

I well remember the night we saw "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," a movie about aliens that came in large oyster-like shells, copied human beings' bodies and took over their minds. I squirmed in my chair every time the aliens took over another soul, and I was mighty glad when the good guys finally won and the movie was over.

As we walked back to Grandma's black '46 Ford, she stopped and exclaimed, "What a beautiful night, just look at all the stars!"

I can't explain why, but something about the way she said it made me tingle from head to toe. I looked up and, indeed, the stars were especially clear, the Milky Way visible even in downtown Birmingham—which was usually pretty smoggy because of the steel mills west of town.

"You know, I just can't believe there aren't people on other planets," I said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because there are so many planets—there must be people on some of them."

"Perhaps you're right," she said, as we reached her car.

Back home, I finished my homework for Mrs. Jenkins' seventh-grade arithmetic class and went to bed.

In the middle of the night, the dream returned: electric ants eating into the left side of my brain, taking over my mind just like in the movie. I awoke with a start, terrified but glad the dream was over again. This time, though, it wasn't over—the ants were still there, gnawing away. Always before, the ants were gone after the dream ended.

"Oh God, please help me!" I groaned, but the ants just kept gnawing like termites.

Finally at my wits' end, I crawled out of bed and staggered into Mom's bedroom, holding my head between my hands, moaning "Ants, ants in my head, I'm on fire in my brain!"

She jumped out of bed quick as a wink, lit three candles, arranged them in a big triangle on the floor, and sat me slap down in the middle. Squatting in front of me, she said some strange words, then placed her thumbs over my eyelids and cupped her hands behind my head.

After what seemed like a really long time, but probably wasn't more than a minute, she said, "Leave him now, he's not ready," and with that, the ants went away. I smiled in relief. She smiled back, saying, "Don't worry Riley, you're safe now. Go back to bed and ask her to come and comfort you."

I yawned and returned to my room. I asked the Mother of Angels to make me feel better, as I had often done before. It wasn't long before I felt warm and cuddly, rocking safely in her big arms. Then I had two really strange dreams.



In the first dream, I was a young woman living on a large island between Florida and Spain. I lived in the temple of the goddess and served the high priestess, Alia. If I was lucky, I would some day succeed her.

Women had ruled my country forever, because it was known that all life came through the mother. And there was yet another reason men allowed women to rule. If they didn't, the goddess would come to them at night when they were asleep, cut off their balls with her razor-sharp knife and feed them to her huge pet cobra.

One day a man I had never before seen showed up at the temple demanding to speak with Alia. He wasn't dressed like any of the other men. Instead of a fine linen robe, he wore a simple loincloth made from animal skin.

By and by, Alia granted him an audience in the worship room. But he refused to meet her there, demanding instead that she come down to the foot of the temple where he stood. I was astounded—surely he must be crazy, I thought! But he stood fast, insisting that Alia come to him, which—as high priestess—she rightly refused to do.

As word spread, a large crowd gathered to see this foolish man who, they knew, would regret his disrespectful actions that very night. He finally gave up waiting for Alia and left.

To my surprise, he was back the next day, again demanding that Alia come down to meet with him. Again, she rightly refused. An even larger crowd gathered this time. Then to my utter amazement, he removed his loincloth, revealing that he still possessed his balls!

In a deep voice, he loudly said, "Oh, men of Atlantis, you and your male ancestors have been fools, half-men, slaves to women. Here I stand this day proving that fact beyond any doubt. From this day forth, you are free men!"

At that moment, he was struck in the back by a dozen arrows, shot from the bows of the eunuch temple guards. He smiled, then fell to the ground, dead.



The second dream was just as strange. I was a young Jewish woman living in Palestine. My father arranged for me to marry the son of a wealthy Jewish merchant in another city. I had never seen my future husband, who had paid my father a small fortune for me.

By Jewish law I was duty-bound to obey my father's every command, and after the marriage I would be duty-bound to obey my husband as I had obeyed my father.

Three days before my wedding, I got very ill and the marriage was postponed. The doctor told my father I was dying and it was in God's hands. Thinking of the fortune, my father was furious.

My mother, who loved me dearly, was grief-stricken. At great risk to herself, she took me to the temple of the goddess where Jewish women were forbidden to go. As a girl she had worshipped there, but that all ended when Jewish soldiers came and killed all the people in her village, except the virgins. The soldier who captured mother sold her to my father to be one of his wives.

A priestess nursed me back to health by giving me weak potions of cobra venom to drink. I returned home two months later to find my father enraged at both me and my mother. He divorced her and sent her out of the village to fend for herself in the desert. Then he threw a big party for his men friends. They all got drunk, and he offered me to them as a present. They raped me over and over until I passed out.

The next day my father took me before the Jewish priests. They ordered that I be stoned to death right then and there for going into the temple of the forbidden goddess. The stones really hurt, but I was glad to be free.



I awoke that morning plenty upset. I told Mom about the dreams, and she said not to worry—that I had had them to prepare me for my life, that I would understand them better when I was older.

I asked about Atlantis, and she said it was a place that had been destroyed by violent volcanic eruptions and earthquakes and had sunk into the sea. I asked about the way the girl was treated in the dream by her father, and Mom said that, indeed, Jewish women were treated like that back in those days.

Instead of going out to play at recess that day, I went to the school library. I asked Mrs. Murphy, the dumpy, gentle-looking, elderly librarian, if the library had any books about Atlantis.

"Why, no, but where did you ever hear about that place?" she asked, with a curious look.

I said I had dreamed about it.

She smiled. "Most people think Atlantis is just a make-believe story, like a fairytale, but who can say? Besides, most fairytales are based on something true!"

"Sort of like the Bible stories?" I asked.

She nodded, her eyes gleaming.

That night I had a dream even stranger than the other two. I flew through space faster than the speed of light. I passed a planet with two suns, one silver, the other gold. The inhabitants, who looked like rainbow people, beckoned to me. I swooped down to investigate. They reached for me, screaming, "Save us, save us!" I awoke, shaking.

Well, I'm getting ahead of myself again. Why, I haven't told you about my childhood sweetheart yet!



Mary Lou

When I was four the Snows built a house next door to ours. Mrs. Snow was a dressmaker and amateur sculptor. She was always out in her backyard with her hammer and chisel, pinging away at big blocks of granite, making this or that funny-shaped person or animal. Mr. Snow was a butcher and a banjo player in a string band. I often heard him practicing in his house and sometimes he played at neighborhood parties. They were real nice people.

Mom told me that Mr. and Mrs. Snow adopted Mary Lou right out of Jefferson-Hillman hospital after her unwed mother bled to death during childbirth, leaving no known kin. No matter about her origins, Mary Lou was certainly worthy of my affections—bright homemade calico dresses, curly black hair in braided pigtails, big teardrop brown eyes, and a Roman nose. And sing—man, could that child sing! I think my favorite song for her to sing in those days was “Zippity-Doo-Dah.”

Mary Lou loved animals and they loved her. From the beginning, she had birds and squirrels eating grain and peanuts out of her hands as she sang, “Mr. Bluebird’s on my shoulder.” And her beagle hound, Hector, was always bringing her live baby rabbits to raise. He was the only beagle I ever knew that would catch a rabbit and not try to eat it. He also liked to catch my tennis shoes and separate them from my feet, despite my loud pleas for laughing Mary Lou to make him stop. I knew even then that he would stop if she wanted him to.

Not long after the Snows moved in, an old Negro named Ely started coming around to do yard work for them. He did yard work for several families in Kundalina.

What I remember most about Ely was the holes he dug in the ground around the Snow's house to plant shrubs in. Each hole he dug he told me the bogey man lived in. Then he and Mary Lou both promised that the bogey man would come that night and get me. Every time that happened, I shrieked home to Mom, terrified.

One day Mom waited until dark, after Ely had gone home and Mary Lou was inside. Then she took me by the hand, marched me over to Mary Lou's yard, dug up a shrub Ely had planted that day, pulled it out of the ground, and made me get down in the hole and sit in it until I was satisfied that there wasn't anything in the hole but me. Then she replanted the shrub.

I never let on to Mary Lou or Ely that I had figured out there wasn't any bogey man. I just played right along with them, pretending to be scared out of my wits while secretly plotting revenge. It wasn't long before I got my chance. It happened in this way.

One day I needed to pee real bad, so I pulled out my weenie and peed in the flower bed in front of our home, right under Mom's bedroom window, right where she sat at her writing desk looking out at me.

She came to the front door and called me over, handing me a cup. "Here, pee in this next time."

After a while I did, and then took her the cup to show her what a good job I had done. "Now take a sip," she suggested. Never having tasted pee before, I gave it a try, my first and last try to be sure. I gagged. "Now you know how plants feel about being peed on," she said.

Mary Lou and Ely never did figure out what turned the corner shrub yellow over the next several months. Finally, when Ely replaced it in the fall, I went over to play the bogey man game. When Ely dug up the dead shrub, I

jumped in the hole and yelled, "Where's the bogey man, where's the bogey man?"

Ely got the strangest look on his face and had no answer. "I think the bogey man did this to your bush; you shouldn't have planted it on top of a mean old bogey man," I stated. There was no more talk about bogey men after that.



Mary Lou liked to play my friend Billy Robinson and me off against each other for her affections, and there wasn't much I wouldn't do to get them—her affections, that is. I suspect Billy felt pretty much the same about her, at least before our big fight when I was five. After that, he didn't seem to care much for her.

In fact, when he grew up he was gay. Although I can't say for certain that our fight, which I am about to describe, had anything to do with his sexual preferences, I always wondered about that. After all, the fight had to have left a real bad taste in his mouth about women.

The way Mary Lou got us into the fight was pretty slick. She took me aside and told me that Billy had called me "chicken" and claimed that if he tried to fight me, I would run home to Mom like I had done over the bogey man. Then she said that if I would fight Billy without running away, she would be my girlfriend.

I wanted more than anything to have Mary Lou all to myself, so I set out to provoke Billy into a fight. Of course, I didn't know that Mary Lou had told Billy the same things she had told me, or that he was just as eager to fight me as I was to fight him.

It didn't take long for us to think up a reason to have it out. It happened as we all three played in my sandbox out in my backyard. Billy built a fort and I

knocked it down. He yelled that my father was a chicken-livered coward, shot in the back running away from the Germans. Actually, Daddy went down over Germany with his entire crew when his B-17's inside starboard propeller flew off the engine housing and severed the wing. On the way down, Daddy radioed the situation to his squadron leader who could do nothing about it in the middle of the night with his plane's bomb bay full of five hundred-pound bombs.

No matter about the sand fort, Billy ought not to have said that about my daddy. I pounded him to within an inch of his life, hitting him with a flurry of roundhouse blows to the face, just like I'd seen the cowboys do to each other in the movies. Blood spurted out of his nose all over me as I pounded him and yelled, "Look at me Mary Lou, look at me!"

I chanced a glance at Mary Lou, anticipating her nodding smile, only to see her looking down and away, pretending like nothing at all was happening. That was unfortunate for Billy, because I was so mad about Mary Lou not looking at me that I gave him a few extra pops for good measure and sent him shrieking home.

Naturally, Mary Lou ran off, leaving me howling in our backyard. Mom rushed out to me, knelt down and held me by the shoulders, trying to figure out what had set me off like a lighted string of Chinese firecrackers, going off one after another, nothing anyone could do to stop them from all exploding until everyone of them had turned to paper dust. Tears came to her eyes when I blurted out what Billy had said about Daddy. She pulled me to her and held me tight, rocking me back and forth, running her fingers through my curly, sandy hair.

Before long Billy's mother brought him back, eyes bruised, lips bleeding, cotton stuffed in his nose. Billy shrieked, "He beat me up for nothin'! I didn't do nothin'! Make Riley's momma spank him!" But Billy's mother took

a look at me, paused, then asked Mom if she knew what had happened.

Mom shared what I had told her Billy said about my daddy being shot in the back running from the Germans. Of course, everyone in town knew how Daddy had really died. Billy's mother asked him if he had said that, and he nodded. With that, she turned him over her lap and gave him just about the worst spanking I ever saw anyone get. Then she stood him in front of me and said in a dead calm voice, "Tell Riley you're sorry for what you said and that you'll never do anything like that again."

Billy was crying so hard he could barely speak, but he got it out finally, and when he finished, I started crying, and I cried and cried. Mom picked me up and carried me inside holding me in her arms and rocking me as I grieved the loss of my beloved daddy.

I couldn't remember him because I was just over one year old when he went overseas. The only memories I had were photographs Mom had taken of him holding me in his lap and reading me the Uncle Remus tales in the old Negro dialect. Afterwards, Mom read me those same stories over and over. She said they were the only thing that calmed me down when I got really out of sorts. And she read to me this time, too.

My all-time favorite story was the one about Br'er Rabbit getting uppity and then getting himself stuck in Br'er Fox's tar baby. Because of what happened to Br'er Rabbit, I secretly vowed never to get myself stuck in a tar baby—never. Once stuck in one, it was just too much trouble to get out. Except sometimes I did get stuck in tar babies when it had something to do with Mary Lou.

She was always getting me and Billy in trouble, like when she got jealous of the way Billy and I whipped out our weenies and peed just about any time and anywhere we wished. One day she hiked up her dress, lowered her

panties, straddled the tiny ditch behind my house, and peed right there in front of Billy and me.

Billy and I had never seen a girl pee before, except for our mommas on the commode. So we laid down on the ground and looked up between Mary Lou's legs to see why she peed that way. To our amazement, we discovered that she didn't have a weenie. The pee came out of her like the water came out of the spring on the school playground.

That made us want to know more, so we rolled her over on her back, panties still down around her ankles, pee still coming out of her, to learn more about how she could possibly pee that way. You can probably imagine that didn't set too well with Mary Lou, having her bare bottom parts turned skyward, peeing toward our puzzled faces. She turned bright red in the face among other places, sprang to her feet, yanked up her panties and ran home. Later Mom told me that the next time Mary Lou peed outside, to look but not touch unless Mary Lou gave me permission.



It was a long time before I saw Mary Lou pull down her britches again, but not because I hadn't been trying to get inside them. We had been dating since seventh grade, and there had been a lot of necking and rubbing our bodies together, but that's as far as she ever let it go. To be honest, I felt like I was about to go crazy. Mary Lou acted like she *wasn't* about to go crazy, but I didn't believe it.

Anyway, one day in the spring when we were sixteen, we went over to the dam on U.S. 280 where we usually caught Kundalina carp and suckers to throw at cars headed north into Birmingham. This time, though, the crappie were bedding in the brush tops that collected around the bridge pilings. Crappie didn't fight so good, but

they were just about the finest eating fish around before the river got polluted, and we wanted to catch a good mess for our families.

There was a crack in the top of the dam where the cold and hot of changing weather caused the cement to split. Down in this crack we often saw snakes—banded water snakes and copperheads usually—enjoying the warmth of the concrete heated by the sun. The water snakes were harmless, but the copperheads were pretty dangerous. Their bites had never killed anybody in Kundalina, but I had heard that one or two folks got pretty sick after being bitten.

This day we walked over to the crack, looked down, and saw a big fat black cottonmouth moccasin, lying wedged in the crack, enjoying life. A really nasty-looking critter, no doubt about that. I knew a cottonmouth was nothing to mess around with. If one bit you, you had to slice the wound and suck out the poison right away if you wanted to go on living.

But this one was wedged way down in the crack, so I poked its side with the tip of my two-piece Wright & McGill spinning rod. That turned out to be about as smart as Br'er Rabbit rearing back and hitting the tar baby with his fist. To my shock, the moccasin wound itself around the tip, and held fast. Then its huge arrowhead-shaped head appeared out of the dark, arching my way, cotton-white mouth open, long pearly fangs bared, hissing like a trapped panther about to pounce.

The world dropped out from under me, my legs buckled. I yanked my rod to free it, and the tip detached, leaving me with the butt half, the moccasin with the tip. I nearly knocked Mary Lou off the dam running toward the bank. When I got there, I sat down on a rock, shaking all over, wringing wet with sweat.

Mary Lou came over and asked, with a laugh, "Find a bogey man down in that crack?"

I wasn't at all amused.

"Come on, let's go get your rod tip back from that little old snake," she teased, tugging my arm.

I didn't think I could stand up. If fact, I felt I was about to puke, but on an empty stomach all I could do was dry heave, just to the right of the agile Mary Lou, mightily disappointing two big fat Kundalina carp lurking in the shadow of the bank at my feet.

That settled my stomach so I could stand without falling in the river. I tied a number six long-shank hook to my fishing line and went back out to the crack in the dam and looked down. Mary Lou at my side.

There down in the crack was my rod-tip, right where I left it in the moccasin's coil. The snake looked considerably more relaxed than before, so I cranked my reel in reverse to lower the hook down. When the hook was beside the rod, I jigged it up and down until I snared the line guide most away from that bad-ugly snake. I slowly reeled in the line until all the slack was out, then I gave a quick yank and the rod tip sailed out of the snake's grasp, out of the crack, over my head, disengaged from the hook, and landed in the deep pool below the dam. That was the last I ever saw of of my rod tip.

"So much for fishing today," I said to Mary Lou.

"Well, what about lunch? Care to join me over on that big flat rock under the bridge?" she said, pointing with the sack holding our lunch.

That sounded like a better plan than trying to fish for tender-mouthed crappie with half a fishing rod, so we went to the rock and ate the lunch she had prepared: tuna fish sandwiches, pickles, homemade cole slaw, and a quart of lemonade. After lunch—a light one for me since I still didn't feel so good—Mary Lou jumped off the rock, pulled down her jeans and panties, and squatted and peed right there in front of me, smiling at my gawking face. Her bottom didn't look at all like it had the last time.

Then she took off her tennis shoes and socks, stripped butt-naked, and waded smack into the middle of the river, glancing back at me over her shoulder with one of her smiles. I froze. It was almost like looking down at the cottonmouth, except worse—Mary Lou was a lot closer than the cottonmouth. In fact, they were both too close for my comfort. As I waffled, my dick got hard, real hard. Man, was I confused.

Turning to face me, the water barely covering her nipples, Mary Lou looked down at the bulge in my jeans, then right into my eyes and chortled, "Well, are you going to fish or cut bait?"

That tilted the scales. Off came my clothes. I charged into the river like a dog chasing a deer. Except instead of a deer—or a snake—I found one hundred and twenty-five pounds of pent-up craziness, matching every bit of mine. As I cupped her breasts in my hands, she grabbed my dick, pulling on it, rubbing it against her crotch. I reached down feeling her pubic hair for the first time ever, feeling inside her with my finger.

"Oh Jesus, stick it in!" she begged.

But I couldn't. There was too much friction from being underwater and she was tight. I pulled her hand, leading her back to the river bank. She looked afraid.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'm confused, I don't know how to do this right!"

"Me either, but lie down on the blanket, I don't want to stop now. Shit, if I stop now, I might ex-p-p-plode!" my voice quivered. I was trembling all over.

I pulled her down beside me, then pushed her onto her back and laid on top of her, trying to get inside. She was oozing a slippery discharge but there was still too much friction. Then she licked her fingers and wiped them around the mouth of her pussy.

"Do that to yourself, Riley," she instructed.

That made it easier, and I was able to enter her a little way, but it was really hurting her. I pushed and she pulled back. So I stopped, the end of my dick just inside.

"Oh Riley, it hurts but I want to so bad!"

I didn't know what to do other than to force it. I pulled out, put some more saliva on my dick, and put it back into position. I kissed her, pushing my tongue deep into her throat. She arched toward me and I rammed deep into her.

"Oh God, oh my God!" she gasped, grabbing me tight to her with her arms and legs.

Now she was the one shaking. I didn't move. Slowly, she began to move her pelvis. I could tell it still hurt, but not as bad. I started moving with her.

"Don't move, Riley, let me move. It hurts too bad when you move."

And so I just held still as she slowly moved toward me and away, holding me tight with her arms and legs, kissing me all over my face, kissing me harder as she ground her pubic bone hard against mine. Her breathing became rapid gasps. The kissing stopped and the grinding became more intense. She unwrapped her legs and placed her feet flat against the ground, heaving her pelvis against mine. Then she screamed, thrusting, grinding, bringing me to her. My asshole felt like it was being yanked out through my dick. I screamed with her.



Later when I told Mom what had happened, she asked how it had been for me.

"To be honest, it liked to scared me half to death at first, then it got so wonderful that I nearly died from feeling so good. It was like, oh heck, you know what I mean don't you?"

Her smile turned the freckles around her eyes into wrinkles. She explained menstruation cycles and how to help Mary Lou lubricate her vagina. Then she reached into her dressing table drawer, pulled out a pack of Trojans, and with a candle showed me how to install one properly—by rolling it on.

"Your daddy told me that the first time he used a rubber with a girl, he unrolled it first and then tried to pull it onto his penis. Said it nearly killed him pulling it on. But that was nothing like the embarrassment he felt when the girl laughed and told him that he was doing it all wrong."

I frowned.

"Next time you and Mary Lou want to have sex, just try unrolling it before you put it on and see for yourself. I'm sure it will make Mary Lou laugh plenty."

"No, thanks. She laughs plenty at me already. The less she has to laugh at me about, the better off I am."

I never appreciated then how special Mom was. I thought all mothers were like her, but I learned as I grew up that most mothers weren't, that most of them were painfully inadequate in the parenting department.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again. Why, I haven't even told you what Mom did to support us.



Rose

Mom wrote a weekly local issues column for the *Birmingham Herald*, the morning newspaper. She got started by writing a controversial piece under the pen name Rose Carruthers and mailing it to the paper with the following cover letter:

Dear Editors:

The accompanying piece, written under a pseudonym to preserve my privacy and safety, is offered as an example of a weekly column I would like to write, entitled "Through Rose-Colored Glass." My fee will be \$300 per month to start. I will mail each week's piece seven days prior to publication date, and the first of each month you will pay me in cash at a place I will designate when I send in the last piece of the month.

If you wish to accept my offer, then simply publish this first piece. If you publish it, say, in next Wednesday's issue, then I will call your business office Thursday morning to learn the name of my editor. I will mail the next piece that very day and will follow that schedule until we mutually agree to change it.

Thanking you for considering this query, I am

Yours truly,

Rose Carruthers

The first piece, reproduced below, was picked up by the syndicated press. Many reporters from around the

country called the *Birmingham Herald* wanting to interview Mom, but her editor, James Savage, could not persuade her to do it, not even anonymously.

♦♦

Little-Boy War

Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist

While I never fully understood World War II—why it had to happen, what it was really about—I realized we had to do something to end it. Otherwise, Mr. Hitler and his Axis friends might have turned the lights out on Earth, bringing us a dark age that would have made the so-called "Dark Ages" of Europe a shining light in the history of this planet. So I was proud when my husband went overseas, and I am still proud that he gave his life for our country and for humanity.

However, I am not at all proud about our nation's involvement in the Korean "conflict," as that excursion is nicely called to avoid any admission that it is just another war. I cannot understand how Americans support a "conflict" that kills our young men, the fathers of many children, to save from Communism Korea, a distant country about half the size of Alabama, when eastern Europe, Russia and China fell to Communism without our so much as lifting a finger to do anything about that!

Something about this just does not make sense. I think I know what that *something* is, and it does not have a thing to do with saving the world from Communism. It has to do with a deep feeling in most men in this country that they are not men. They feel like the little boys I knew in grammar school who sneaked into the bathroom to play "mine's-bigger-than-yours," as if that somehow made them men.

I have known two real men in my life—my father and my husband. They never played mine's-bigger-than-yours.

Many times I saw them walk away from a fight and be called "chicken." Yet they never ran from a fight that *had* to be fought, one where their lives or family were threatened.

So instead of going off to Korea, real men would stay home and heal our country, which is still very much wounded from World War II. They would take the boys who lost their fathers in that war fishing. They would hold the girls who lost their fathers in their laps and tell them they are loved. They would help the widows of the men killed in that war heal their loneliness. They would tell parents who lost sons in that war how bravely their sons died.

If the little boys running our government and fighting over in Korea do not grow up, how will our country heal? How will their sons grow up to be real men? How will their daughters grow up to feel that men are safe, that men can be trusted to do what God put men on Earth to do: father God's children?

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The reaction swamped Mr. Savage's desk. Missed men, especially men with proud military backgrounds, demanded Mom's head, that she be fired. On the other hand, women readers praised Mom to the sky. Mr. Savage found himself on a razor's edge that got a lot sharper the next week after Mom's second piece ran.

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Men on Top

*Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist*

Last week I attended Sunday services at one of our local churches. The minister, an older gray-haired man,

spoke to us about marriage. Although he did say some pretty good things—like marriage was holy and sacred, like it was preferred to adultery and having children out of wedlock—he said something that really raised the hackles on the back of this red-blooded woman's neck.

He said it was God's will that wives be ruled by their husbands and have their husband's babies, that this was clearly set out in the book of Genesis in the part about Adam and Eve. Now I never was told such a thing when I was a little girl, and for sure my mother never played the barefoot, pregnant slave to my father—and I didn't play it with my husband, either. Yet my folks had a great marriage, and so did my husband and I.

That got me to wondering how in the world we could have had such good marriages after disobeying the very word of God that this minister quoted in church right out of the Bible? And that set me to thinking about the Bible passage he had quoted. The more I thought on it, the more suspicious I got. Here's why.

Moses got the notion that he was supposed to lead the Jews into the so-called Promised Land, known in those days as Canaan. The Canaanites were an agrarian, peaceful and prosperous people who worshipped the Queen of Heaven, known for her great wisdom and powers of prophecy, and for thousands of years symbolized by the serpent. The Canaanite women had the same rights and freedoms as Canaanite men. Canaanite children carried their mothers' names and inherited property through them.

Old Moses was rightly concerned that if his soldiers merely invaded Canaan and the Jews settled onto the land, that Jewish women might fall into goddess worship just like their new neighbors and start having the same sexual fun that had always been permitted exclusively to Jewish *men*. Moses was also rightly concerned that Jewish men would start messing around with liberated Canaanite women, begetting children by them who would inherit their mothers' names and property, throwing in all sorts of monkey wrenches.

So before the big invasion, Moses did two things to protect his male kingdom. One was to tell his soldiers that Jehovah wanted them to kill every man, woman and child Canaanite. This is documented in the Old Testament. The other thing Moses did, which you have to read between the lines in Numbers and Deuteronomy to see, was to have the Levite priests invent a biblical fable destroying the Queen of Heaven in the eyes of the Jews.

In that story, Jehovah (Moses) told Adam and Eve (Jewish men and women) that they could eat the fruit from the Tree of Life (the fruit of the jealous God) but not the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (the fruit of the wise Goddess). The serpent (the Goddess) told Eve not to listen to Jehovah and to eat the forbidden fruit anyway. Naturally, Eve complied. She then talked Adam into eating the fruit of the Goddess, and you know the rest.

By setting up this fable and convincing the people that it was true, Moses demoted Jewish women to second-class citizens. They were made to believe the only way for women to reach God was through men—that women, being merely one of Adam's rib bones, had no direct route to God. The rib-bone story was yet another fabrication to negate the well-known fact—despised by Moses, which indicated how he felt about his own mother who abandoned him in the bulrushes—that all life comes out of the mother!

When Jesus appeared, he tried to change this longstanding notion of male supremacy by running with women and men alike and by teaching that all people were equal before God. But alas, his most important followers, St. Peter and St. Paul, reverted to the ways of Moses, putting women back into slavery where most of them still remain because our ministers teach the way of Moses instead of the way of Jesus.

After this piece, it got so hot for Mr. Savage that he wrote a special editorial.

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The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave

*James Savage
Associate Editor*

Rose Carruthers' brand-new column, "Through Rose-Colored Glass," has generated a tempest in Birmingham. This newspaper, and this editor especially, have been asked (and not very politely either) to discontinue Mrs. Carruthers' column, which we have run for only two weeks.

We have received 307 letters making this demand, several from our important advertisers, who have threatened to pull their advertising if we do not pull Mrs. Carruthers' column. All but eight complaints were made by indignant men who either fought for our country or who were worried about our community falling under the spell of Satan. On the other side, we have received 416 letters—all but fourteen from women—praising Mrs. Carruthers to the sky.

I do not mention this public opinion "poll" to justify this paper's decision to continue Mrs. Carruthers' column. I do it simply to point out the fact that men and women appear to have very different reactions to what she has to say. We reject pressure to censor this newspaper and Mrs. Carruthers because freedom of the press and freedom of speech and religion are three of the essential Constitutional protections for which our Founding Fathers risked *their* very lives. Apparently, men in the Birmingham area are more interested in having their views be the prevailing views than they are in protecting the Constitution of the United States that they claim to have risked their lives to defend.

Those who wish to suppress someone like Mrs. Carruthers because they do not agree with her remind this writer of the King of England during colonial days and also of Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. This newspaper would never have bowed to censorship by the King of England, Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin, and it will not bow to the censorship demands of the Holy Inquisitors of Birmingham. If you do not like what we print in this newspaper, then we suggest that you read and advertise in the *Birmingham Reporter* instead. It comes out every evening except Sunday, and perhaps it will suit you better.

♦♦

After what I later saw happen in Birmingham during the civil rights movement—the antics of Bull Conner and his police henchmen, the bombing of the Negro churches, and the police and Birmingham leaders turning their backs on the activities of the KKK—I'm mighty glad that Mom never let anyone know who she really was. No telling what would have happened to her, to us, or to Kundalina if she had been identified.

Indeed, Mom went to great lengths to make sure that nobody ever knew who she was or where she lived. Each week she drove to a different part of town and mailed the next week's article to Mr. Savage from the nearest branch post office. In the last piece for a given month, she enclosed a note telling him where to meet her in town, alone, to pay her for that month's work.

The day she was to get paid, she put on a black wig to cover her strawberry blond hair, plastered her face with make-up, put on false eyelashes and a pair of green cat-eyed glasses, and slipped into a plain off-white cotton dress. She drove into one of the outlying communities, parked her car and caught a bus into the middle of

downtown Birmingham. Then she walked to where she was to meet Mr. Savage, and their meetings were always brief.

Leaving Birmingham, she always took a bus headed the opposite direction from where she had left her car, got off a few blocks away and caught a bus to the right place. But she never got off the bus near her car. Instead, she walked over a mile sometimes, usually around in circles and through back alleys before getting to her car and driving home.

Even if someone managed to follow her and take down her license number, it wouldn't have done any good. Mom had a collection of license tags she had gotten from a junkyard out in Irondale to the east of Birmingham, and each week she put a different one on her car before she left to deliver her article.

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In the late 1950s, Mom compiled the more notable of her columns into a notebook and sent it to a literary agent she had heard about in New York City, giving the *Birmingham Herald* P.O. box as her return address.

The literary agent wrote back that the notebook had caused a sensation, that every publisher she had shown it to had said, in effect, "Whatever you have been offered by someone else for the rights to this work, we will top it." Mom never expected that kind of reaction, and it was then she realized that if she signed a literary contract and her notebook was published, her anonymity might soon end. So she wrote the agent this letter:

Dear _____:

After much thought, I have decided not to enter into a literary agreement for my notebook. My weekly column makes sufficient money for me to support my family and

nothing good could come, I think, of my developing notoriety and becoming "rich" because of things I write from my heart. Therefore, I offer each publisher to whom you have shown my work permission to publish and sell for its own ends any or all of my notebook. Please do not reply to this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Rose Carruthers

Notwithstanding Mom's request, the literary agent wrote back. Mom wrote on the outside of the unopened envelope, "Refused, please return to sender," and dropped it in the outgoing mail box outside the downtown Birmingham post office.

Mom was a little curious to see what would come of it, but nothing ever did. Not one publishing house that had wanted to pay a handsome sum for the exclusive rights to her work, published any of it after she gave it away, and after awhile the literary agent returned Mom's notebook.



The Tiny Kingdom

This brings me to tell you about Mom's marriage when I was fifteen to Abner Mills, a successful Birmingham lawyer. She met him at a Christmas party given by a woman Mom knew from Birmingham Southern College, located just south of Ensley where one of the big steel mills was. Mom's friend had married into a rich family and lived over in Mt. Brook. Abner lived there, too.

He was a nice-looking man, about six foot two, curly brown hair, and a wrinkling brow. But I didn't particularly like the way his eyes shifted around, taking in everything like a hawk. Well, he was a lawyer. I was more than a little jealous, too, so I tried to make his life miserable, like stuffing a potato up the exhaust pipe of his Buick and hiding an old rotten carp under the front seat one night when he stayed over. After all, he lived in Mt. Brook.

No matter what I did to run Abner away, he just laughed it off, and that really endeared him to Mom. He also worked his way into her affections when she told him that she was a professional writer who wrote under a pseudonym for reasons of privacy. She said she could never disclose to him what or for whom she wrote, and he said that was fine by him.

After about six months of seeing each other, her spending some weekends with him in Mt. Brook and him spending a few down in Kundalina at our home, they decided to go down to the Jefferson County courthouse in

Birmingham and get hitched. I learned of it the day before they did it and pitched a fit.

Mom let me go on until I got hoarse and couldn't yell any more, then she held me by the shoulders, looked me straight in the eye and said, "I need a grown-up man in my life, Riley. Soon you will be up and gone from here, and I don't want to live the rest of my life alone." I begged her to wait until I *was* up and gone before she did it, but she just hugged me and said, "Don't worry, it'll work out just fine. You'll see."

The next week, Abner put his home on the market and moved in with us, and that really started tongues wagging: a Mt. Brookie living in Kundalina. Mom must have gotten a good laugh, just to herself, because one of her favorite targets for her column was Mt. Brook. Some of the things she did to the Mt. Brookies in print paled what I did to them with suckers and carp. Take this piece from her notebook.

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the tiny kingdom

*Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist*

I make pop-calls on many churches in and around Birmingham to get a feel for what goes on in my community. Last Sunday, I dropped in on the Mt. Brook Baptist Church, located on Montevallo Road just east of Mt. Brook Village. It is a real nice, big, red-brick church, with a steeple higher than anything else around, even higher than the old pine trees that are older than Mt. Brook. A lady in the congregation was kind enough to tell me that her church was a spin-off from the Southside Baptist Church, the one down in Five Points South made out of granite with the big round marble columns and flights of marble steps out front.

Anyway, the thing that struck me most about my visit with the Mt. Brook Baptists was the sermon their minister, Mr. Sevier, gave. He started out with the usual stuff about how God wasn't at all pleased with how sinful everybody on Earth was—that if people didn't wake up and start living right, they would pretty soon find themselves in hell dancing Satan's tune. Then Reverend Sevier announced that just two days before he had a vision in which God told him that he and his church were designed for special work.

In the vision, God said that the people at Mt. Brook Baptist were favored in His eyes, as evidenced by their worldly wealth. God said the people at Mt. Brook Baptist Church had a special responsibility to the rest of the Mt. Brook community, and that responsibility was to make sure the powers of evil did not corrupt the beautiful people and community of Mt. Brook, a manifestation of God's kingdom on Earth.

Well, I expected that the next thing out of Reverend Sevier's mouth would be something about loving my neighbor as myself or perhaps the story of the good Samaritan—God knows all that money in Mt. Brook could help a lot of poor Birmingham folks—but nothing like that came out of his mouth at all. Instead, what he said was that God had revealed that the powers of evil were in those people who wanted to mix the races, to corrupt the blood of God's chosen people, to integrate the schools, restaurants and buses, yea even to integrate Mt. Brook and ruin its citizens' property values. Satan wanted to do this to the people of Mt. Brook because he was jealous of them.

As Reverend Sevier preached, the pure red blood in him came to his face, and he looked like he might have just come down with a fever. He shook his finger in the direction of Birmingham and said, "Our Lord and Master, Jesus, warned many times that we must not sleep, that we must stay awake, and I tell you as I stand here that many of you sleep, many of you are not awake to the approaching Satan!"

Finally the service ended and many of the congregation gathered in the recreation room below the chapel for sweet cakes, soft drinks and coffee. Boy, was that a big shock! After

what I had just heard Reverend Sevier say about Satan sending Negroes to destroy Mt. Brook, those very refreshments were served by two Negro men and three Negro women dressed in white servants' clothing!

As I left the church and walked toward my parked car, I saw several Negro chauffeurs sitting in cars waiting to pick up their employers and several Negro nannies walking young white children home from church. And as I drove onto Montevallo Road in front of the church, a Birmingham city bus passed by, loaded with Negro servants headed for Birmingham to spend Sunday afternoon with their families in places like Powderly and Ishkooda. I went home and prayed for God to protect the people in the tiny kingdom from Satan.

♦♦

That piece tagged Mt. Brook and spawned many tiny-kingdom jokes, most of them not too kind. Abner was a Mt. Brookie, and most of his friends were Mt. Brookies. If he had known Mom had given Mt. Brook that moniker, he probably would never have let me work in his law firm that summer.

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Being a runner for Abner's law firm was an eye-opening experience for a kid who had never been in a downtown office building in his life, much less in a law office. The law firm was located in the City Federal Building at the corner of Third Avenue and Twenty-First Street, right next to the Melba Theater.

Formerly named the Comer Building after a wealthy Mt. Brook industrialist, it was the tallest building in Birmingham, even in Alabama at the time. The name was changed to the City Federal Building after City Federal

Savings & Loan Association bought it. The entrance was marble from floor to ceiling, and the elevators were shiny brass. Abner's offices, which took up the entire sixteenth floor, were plush—heavy carpeting, brown mahogany paneled rooms, and even marbled men's and ladies' bathrooms.

Mostly I just delivered papers to other lawyers and to the Jefferson County courthouse up the street. But there was one case Abner handled that I will share with you because I knew in my bones as soon as I heard about it that everything I had suspected about him was true, that the sooner he was gone from our house, the better off Mom and I would be.

One day as I sat in the law library arranging some papers for one of the other lawyers, I heard Abner out in the hall talking with one of his partners about this man named Jasper who had died and whose wife then changed her will so as to leave everything she inherited from Jasper to one of their sons because he was somehow afflicted, cutting off without a dime their other son who was a successful doctor in town.

Abner said angrily, "Jasper would roll over in his grave if he knew what crazy Millie has gone and done this time. She never was right in the head about things. Why, when she tried to divorce him about ten years back, I had to help him commit her to a mental hospital. Man, was she messed up. It took three series of electroshock treatments before she came to her senses and called off her plans to divorce the most important client I have ever had and the finest man I have ever known. I owe it to Jasper to get Millie to execute a new will putting everything back to fifty-fifty between their two sons, and tonight I want you and two of our secretaries to go with me over to her home in Mt. Brook and witness her new will, which I've prepared for her to sign."

When I told Mom about this she looked none too happy, but she kept whatever was going on in her mind to herself. And plenty was going on there, because not knowing what his wife wrote had all of a sudden started working on Abner pretty good. They were getting into some pretty big fights over it and he was getting abusive toward me, no longer showing his good nature when I pulled my pranks. Mom was having to step between us a lot. I wasn't as big as Abner, yet, but I knew how to take care of myself, and you are about to learn how that happened.



Roland

One Sunday afternoon about a month after I told Mom about the will-changing case, after Mom, Abner and I finished a mostly-silent Sunday dinner, and while she and Abner were out in the living room, Roland Sanders, the Shelby County deputy sheriff who lived in Kundalina, came to our front door.

Roland and Mom went way back—he and Daddy had been best friends. Mom was always making pies and shirts for Roland, and he in turn kept us in firewood and did odd fix-up jobs around our house, using me as an apprentice so that I could learn how to be a handyman myself. And Roland taught me a whole bunch of other things I needed to know to get along in life.

Like there was the time I was thirteen, when our grammar school football team got stomped by those sixteen-year-olds over at New Merkle. Large for my age, I was the center for our team. Large was relative, though, because I was a midget compared to the guy across from me. He rolled me over like a bowling pin every time I snapped the ball, and more often than not caught Billy Robinson, our quarterback, or one of our other backs in the backfield before they could take more than a couple of steps.

Anyway, that very night of my ignominious single-handed defeat of my own team, Roland came over and took me to the school practice field. In the headlights of his

patrol car, he lined up against me and pretended to be the guy who had run all over me all that afternoon. It was instant replay, only I wasn't wearing pads or a helmet. Roland, six foot four and about two hundred thirty pounds of steel, ran through me like a train, making me long for the New Merkle nose guard.

Roland had gotten big and strong by helping his daddy snake pine logs with a mule off United States Steel Company land from the time he was nine. As far as I knew, he had never needed his county-issued .38 special revolver loaded with hollow-tips to get people's undivided attention. Although he still did regular deputy sheriff work, he also spent a lot of time at the Sheriff's Boys' Ranch working with young boys from troubled homes.

After walking on me like a rug a few times, Roland showed me how to low-block him, just below the knees. Then he lined up and came at me. His shin hit me in the left collarbone and it felt like I had been killed. But he fell down on top of me. We lined back up and he came at me again, this time hitting me square in the top of my head, jamming my skull down into my neck and my neck into my back. All I saw was stars, but I felt him fall on top of me again. I was getting the hang of it, fast. Had to because I couldn't take much more of that. Afterwards, I never got whipped in the line again.

Roland later showed me a couple of neat tricks that kept me from ever getting whipped in a fight. They were so simple and devastating that it's a wonder everybody doesn't know about them. But he made me promise never to teach these maneuvers to anyone else—said they were too dangerous and would be misused. I asked him several times where he had learned that sort of stuff. He had spent a few years in Japan after the war, and I figured he learned it there, but he never would say.



So Roland was pretty special to Mom and me, and I was glad that he was standing in the living room when Mom said plenty loud for me to hear every precious word, even from where I stood in my bedroom: "Abner, I wanted a witness for this. I've had all from you I can stand. You are trying to own me and you are abusive to Riley. This must stop, today. Until it stops, this is how things will be between us: I won't cook for you, wash for you, sleep with you, or let you stay in my home. You must leave this day and go somewhere and think about all this. If you decide you can let me be myself and be nice to Riley, then you can come back and we can have a nice life together, nicer than you probably can ever imagine. Otherwise, have one of your lawyer friends draw up the divorce papers putting us right back where we were before we got married."

Hearing Mom say those things made my heart sing, and it also made me want to see in the worst way possible what would happen next. I peeked around the corner of the door opening into the living room. Abner looked first at Roland and then at Mom. To say that Abner looked none too happy would not do the sick look on his face any justice at all. Had he been at the river, a school of Kundalina carp no doubt would have positioned themselves just the right distance out in the river to receive their next meal.

Without a word, Abner got up and walked past me into his and Mom's bedroom, packed his things, loaded them in his car, and left without saying so much as good-bye. I never saw him again.

That night at dinner, Mom talked about what she had done with Abner, and asked if I had any questions. I was so glad she had run him off that all I wanted to know was why she had waited so long.

She said that first she had taken time to see how she contributed to the situation, so that she could change whatever she was doing to cause Abner to act like he had been acting. But for the life of her she hadn't been able to see that she had done anything wrong.

After clearing herself of wrongdoing, she then tried to figure out if there was any real likelihood of Abner changing. She wasn't rightly sure about that, so she decided to quit messing around and put her foot down. She had hoped he would start acting differently, but she was fully prepared for him to get up and walk out.

When she finished telling me this, I looked at her, smiling. But she wasn't finished.

"Riley," she said, "I really didn't know how it would turn out with Abner, but judging by the way he reacted, I'm going to be mighty surprised to see him again.

"Sometimes, though, you *do* know—like when I used to work over at the Water Works Board. The men there were all married, and they knew I wasn't. They were always trying to get me to go out with them behind their wives' backs. I asked them to quit bothering me, but they wouldn't do it. I thought about telling their wives, but I figured in the long run it would only make matters worse for me, if I was still working there. So I just resigned.

"My boss begged me to stay, said he couldn't find anybody that worked as well as I did, but I said I had to leave because none of the men there would leave me alone, including him. You see, he pushed me harder than anybody to go out with him. The day I left, I told him that if he or any of the other men ever asked me to go out with them again, I would call their wives. And I added that if they ever showed up around Kundalina, they would have to answer to Roland Sanders. Just about everybody knew of Roland—that he won the Congressional Medal of Honor at Iwo Jima—so there wasn't much else I needed to say."

"The point, Riley, is that if you ever get into a bad situation with someone, and if you know in your heart that he simply cannot or will not change, there is no point in browbeating him. It's simply a waste of time, and it's also a way to create a much worse situation. Simply state your decision to leave, and if you are asked for your reasons, state them as honestly and firmly as you can. Then end it, promptly," she took a deep breath, "and don't look back."

Right then, she burst into tears. I didn't really know what to do, never having seen her cry like that. So I just grabbed her in my arms, and then she really let go.

Later that night she told me things about her and Daddy that I didn't really understand at the time—that he just turned up one day in an orphanage in Tennessee when he was two years old; that he had come to Kundalina out of nowhere when she was nineteen, swept her off her feet, and married her two months later in her favorite yellow dress; that he wasn't really dead, at least not in the way that most people thought.

After that Mom started doing a lot of painting—really angry- and sad-looking pieces that she didn't talk to me about. I knew better than to ask, because after my big fight with Billy Robinson she had taught me to paint about how I felt whenever I was upset about something. "Eventually, you will paint all of those bad feelings out of you, and then you will feel better and be able to get on with your life," she had said.



Sudden Change

One afternoon in early May, near the end of my senior year at Shades Valley High School next to Homewood, Mom handed me a yellowed 9" x 12" manila envelope. On the outside was handwriting I didn't recognize: "Give to Riley when he's ready." I turned the envelope over but there was nothing on the back.

"That's from your father, Riley," Mom said. "He gave it to me to keep for you, and it's time for you to have it."

I rode my bicycle over to the river, under the bridge on U.S. 280, and sat down on the sparkling rock. I opened the letter with my pocket knife and emptied its contents into my lap. Out fell a lock of curly golden hair—Daddy's hair; a picture of him and Mom; a silver medallion with a twisting infinity sign imprinted into it; a flat piece of gold about the size of a playing card containing what looked like hieroglyphics; and an aged letter written in the same handwriting as that on the envelope.

I carefully opened the letter and read it. I put it down and shook like I had never shaken before. Then I picked it up and read it again.

I returned home to find Mom sitting on the front porch of our little house, waiting for me. Dinner was ready: spring garden vegetables we had grown together and chicken salad and fresh lemonade that she made better than anybody else.

We had always grown enough vegetables for the bugs, birds and varmints to have plenty to eat, too. Every

fall, we drove to Massey's feed store in Birmingham and bought two one hundred-weight bags of baby-chick scratch feed, a mixture of various cracked grains that would not sprout into weeds when spread on the ground. Each winter we sowed the garden with the scratch feed, bringing birds of all kinds, which in return for being fed kindly fertilized our garden and limed the acid North Alabama soil with their droppings, and then in the spring nested nearby and fed their young the bugs and worms from our garden. The worms loved bird manure more than just about anything, and they ate it with relish and turned it into worm castings, the finest fertilizer.

The vegetables Mom and I grew in that garden were purer and better than you could ever buy in a grocery store or even at the farmers' market down on First Avenue North, for that matter. And the robust worms in that garden, which we sold at fifty cents a can at our fresh produce stand out on U.S. 280, were prized as fishing bait by just about everybody who fished in the river or at Lake Purdy to the east, out of which the left-hand tributary of the Cahaba River flowed.

For years the garden also had one other thing that was sort of special—Mary Lou's barn cat, Heathcliff. Black and white with a black goatee, Heathcliff was a deadly hunter. This worked out pretty well for our garden because that's where he liked to do most of his hunting. He was always catching grasshoppers, mice, rabbits, moles and chipmunks that came to dine on the crops. But his favorite prey was mockingbirds. Boy, did that cat like to eat mockingbirds!

The way he went about it was pretty slick. He lay in an open space on his back, dead still for however long it took a nearby mockingbird—which instinctively hates cats—to see him. Before long, the mockingbird couldn't stand it any longer and started dive bombing old Heathcliff, who just lay there, not moving a hair on his

body, but not taking his eyes off the mockingbird, either. Finally the mockingbird got a little too saucy, flew just a little too close, and then Heathcliff had himself another mockingbird sandwich.

Mom loved to watch Heathcliff stalk his prey, and one morning he caught a chipmunk under her window as she was writing. As cats are prone to do, he was slowly torturing the poor rodent to death, releasing it then snatching it back with his paw, pinning it to the ground, making it squeak. The chipmunk worked its way out under Mom's car, where Heathcliff pinned it again. He released the hapless critter, which ran with its last ounce of strength into the street with Heathcliff in hot pursuit into the path of an oncoming car that flattened Heathcliff's head like a pancake, making his eyes squish out.

Mom loved that cat as much as Mary Lou and I did, and after we came home from school that afternoon and learned what had happened, we three tearfully buried him in our garden along with a piece of fish, which he had always enjoyed whenever we had a fish dinner.

Well, I have digressed a little, so let me get back to that night after I read Daddy's letter.

After dinner Mom said, "I gave you the envelope today because tonight I leave to be with your father."

I burst into tears and grabbed her, shrieking, pleading with her not to leave, giving all sorts of reasons why I couldn't live without her, all to no avail.

"You will understand in time," she said, and then walked into her bedroom where I heard her crying softly and talking to someone.

I tiptoed to the door of her room and peeked in, but couldn't see anyone in there but her.

She came out holding a small bottle that looked like an amber medicine bottle. Pouring the clear liquid equally into two Bama jelly glasses, she offered me one, taking the other herself.

"Drink this and it will help you with your mission, the one your father was not able to complete," she said, tears forming in her eyes. "And it will prepare me to go be with him and help you through this passage," she added.

We drank the contents of the glasses silently, and I felt my throat burn and my skin tingle, like I had just come in from the cold and jumped into a hot bath.

"I've done what I can to prepare you," Mom said. "It would have been better if your father had been here to help, but most of what you need to know you have learned, and the rest you can get from either Grandma or Roland. They know about this, and so do a few other people around here, but you don't need to know who they are just yet. You may never need to know their identities, although they will always know yours. If you ever really need them, they will come to your aid."

Mom motioned for me to follow into her bedroom. She lay down on her bed and said some words I had never heard before and can't repeat because I don't know how to make those kinds of sounds with my mouth. Then a strange blue light encircled her. In the middle of her stomach, I saw an image just like the medallion in the envelope. Then she rose up out of her body like a ghost, smiled at me, and suddenly beside her was a ghost-like man, my father.

They faced me arm-in-arm, smiled, and slowly faded out of sight. That was it; they were gone, together again. I just sat there, stunned, wrapped in some sort of damp, heavy emotional blanket. A great weight pressed in from all sides, especially around my head. It was too much, and I curled up and lay down on Mom's bed, sinking under the weight. I must have stayed in a half-awake trance for hours, staring numbly into the dark. Then it was morning.

As if by magic, the terrible numbness was gone. I wasn't upset, but I was plenty confused. I called Grandma and told her. She said to take the medallion and the gold plate with the strange writing on it and put them both in a place where nobody could find them, a place where they would always be when I needed them.

I only knew one place like that—the vault at City Federal Savings & Loan. That's where I took the items the next day, right after Roland helped me take Mom's body to John Rideout's mortuary in Homewood to have her cremated.

After leaving the vault, I went down to the *Birmingham Herald* and left Mom's last article with Mr. Savage's secretary. I darted in and out so fast that nobody asked any questions, but I imagine that Mr. Savage and Mom's fans had plenty of unanswered questions after they read her farewell piece.

♦♦

Parting Words

*Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist*

I have written pieces for this column for many years. You have known me as Rose Carruthers, but that is not who I am—that is only my pseudonym. Even my editor of all these years, Mr. James Savage, does not know my true identity. I have remained under cover because I knew much of what I wanted to write would not be well received.

So in this, my last column—yes, this is my last column, you will never hear from me again—I wish to speak to what I think is the major problem men and women face today, which is that our governments, businesses, churches and universities are still run by little boys playing mine's-bigger-than-yours. And who supports these little boys in men's

bodies? It is women who have never known a real man, women who do not know what being a real woman is like, women who shoulder the blame for the way men feel—and have done so ever since women bought into the Garden of Eden story!

It is impossible for a female human being to be a real woman when she believes there is something inherently evil with being a woman, and it is similarly impossible for a male human being to be a real man when he hates and fears women. This is what I see wrong with our community, state, nation and world.

Witness the many problems that come from that woman-hating, woman-fearing attitude: war, imperialism, communism, religious fanaticism, greedy business practices, sexual discrimination, child and spouse abuse, and alcoholism. These cancers are the manifested results of the rape of the the female side of creation—the nurturing, receptive, feeling, intuitive, creative aspects of being.

It has been said, "The least shall go first and the greatest shall go last." You women must go first. You are afraid to be real women because you believe you need real men to safeguard you. You must give up that way of thinking; otherwise you will forever remain little girls waiting on Prince Charming or Daddy Warbucks to come along and take the place of the manly father and husband you have never had.

You have to "take the bull by the horns," you have to start saying "no" every time you feel like saying it. Right now, just about every one of you says "yes" when you know inside that you want to say "no." This is destroying you because every time you say "yes" when you do not want to say it, you deny your own God-given feelings, intuition and wisdom.

At first, saying "no" every time you mean it will scare you out of your wits—and it will scare the men in your lives out of their wits as well. However, your men probably will not act afraid; most likely they will puff up and act angry, enraged. But be assured that beneath that reaction is terror—little boys scared silly that something awful has

happened to their "mommas" and something even more awful is about to happen to *them*.

And here is what you women must do to evoke that terror in yourselves and in your men, which will open the door for you and your men to reach what lies beneath it—your God-like natures. Go on strike across the board. Join together and withhold your favors from men. Stop keeping their houses, washing their clothes, cooking their meals, covering for their mistakes, making their beds, having sex with them, giving them children to man their governments, churches and businesses, pay their taxes, fight their wars.

Do this for about a year and you will see incredible changes in this city, in this state, in this country, and, yes, even in this world, for what you do here in Birmingham, Alabama, will ripple out like a wildfire fanned by huge winds through a tinderbox forest dried by months of drought.

This is my final gift to you, and having given it, I now "retire" from the work I came to Earth to do. I turn to things that I have put off for some time now. What those things are, where I go to do them, and who I really am you do not need to know. If you have read my column over the years, then you know all you need to know about me. Nothing I could add here would increase your awareness of who I am or what I have written. I hand you your true destiny. It's yours for the taking—if you want it.

♦♦

Doctor Graham, the town doctor, said it was a stroke. Maybe that was the physical cause of Mom's death, but I knew, and several other people in Kundalina knew, there was more to her passage than modern medicine would ever grasp.

The third morning after Mom's departure, Roland drove to Homewood and brought back Mom's cremated remains in a clay urn. Nearly thirty people came to our home that beautiful spring Saturday afternoon for the

eulogy service in our vegetable garden. I had laid a large circle of flagstones around the perimeter of the garden for people to stand on, with a single flagstone in the middle for Roland to deliver the eulogy. Roland had advised that he should preside, that I should simply observe.

He asked those present to say whatever they wanted, and nearly everyone said something. Mary Lou, wearing one of her homemade calico dresses, long dark pigtails tied with yellow ribbons, and a yellow daffodil pinned over her left ear, was the only one I had told about "Rose Carruthers." Mary Lou sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" sort of like I had heard it sung on the Negro radio station, WJLD, but with her own special throaty flavor.

After she finished singing, it was stone quiet. A cock bobwhite quail in the woods behind our home whistled to his covey. Then Roland read a poem.



In Loving Memory of Alice Strange

God's daughter, Alice Strange, came to Earth,
Her mission to experience what God had made,
To live, laugh and play, to work, love and hate,
To hurt and be hurt, to forgive and to die.

It is said the soul comes to Earth in fear,
Knowing there will be much pain in life.
Yet come Alice did, for all must be initiated,
To earn the right to be with God.

Alice encountered many barriers to living her life,
Ones that do not exist in the spirit realms—
Fear, anger, criticism, loss, loneliness and grief,
And she experienced and rose above them all.

There were many important choices for Alice,
But the biggest choice was only this:
Whether to live her life to the fullest,
Or to safely blend in with the herd.

Now her course is finished, her return sounded.
Her soul has welcomed that signal,
Knowing she will soon be home,
Where a place has been prepared for her.

Now comes her time to stand and be counted,
To give back her talents multiplied tenfold.
And when her roll is called up yonder,
She will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."



Roland stood, head bowed. I thought he was about to cry. After a bit, he raised his head, and with tears in his eyes looked me straight in the eye, and said, "Alice always said that there is far more to life than meets the eye, and having known her most of my life, I can only say she knew what she was talking about. Some of you here today understand this more than others, but all of you recognize in your hearts that there is far more to life than we can measure with our five senses.

"Alice also said that we should live each day as if it were our last, paying all our debts, monetary or otherwise, before the sun set on them. As I look around, I see no one here to whom Alice owed anything, and I don't think I see anyone who owed anything to her, either. She gave us her all, and we gave her our all. She left feeling complete, and we send her off, feeling complete with her.

"I stand holding this small urn containing her ashes, the only physical remains of this woman so dear to us, this woman who finished her course on Earth and who

now moves into another realm of existence, a realm we too shall someday experience if we live life as she did. So we bid you farewell, dear soul, and look forward to the day when we again travel side by side. It is finished."

He opened the urn and sprinkled Mom's ashes around the garden. Then he placed a single yellow rose on the rock where he had been standing and walked to me and we embraced. I felt numb, like I was covered by the wet blanket again.

"Riley, I'm always here for you," he said, shaking my hand. Then he walked toward his car followed by the others, leaving me with Mary Lou in the garden.

I took her hand and we walked to the back porch.

"I think I need to be alone, Mary Lou. See you tomorrow?"

"Okay, Riley."

After a hug, she left. I found the keys to Mom's car and drove up on Oak Mountain near where 280 cuts through and heads south down toward Sylacauga. I parked and walked down the ridge, away from the highway for about a mile, then sat down on the rocks facing Birmingham. The green ribs of the Appalachians blended into a blue haze, in which I could clearly see Vulcan atop Red Mountain.

I sat there all night, staring at Vulcan's red light. I knew I would be doing a lot of painting.



Communion

I thought fondly of Mom and old Heathcliff the next Saturday afternoon as I slowly dug a pailful of dirt and worms from our garden—mostly big red worms, but a few were monster black wrigglers nearly a foot long. I had to put a porcelain plate over the dirt to keep the wrigglers from crawling away.

Mary Lou's father loaned us his square-back Grumman canoe, and we threw a blanket over Mom's car and tied the canoe upside down over the blanket to the front and rear bumpers. We drove over to the bridge just upstream from the dam on U.S. 280, and as we unloaded the canoe and our fishing tackle, Roland drove up in his patrol car.

"Going fishing?" he asked.

"Yeah, hope to catch a mess of bream," I answered.

"Well, about fifty yards up the Lake Purdy branch of this here river, just below the first shoal, right out in the middle of the river, is a bed of fine shellcrackers. If you sneak up on them, you just might catch some of the biggest yellow-bellied bream you've ever seen."

We thanked him for the tip and paddled upstream. The Lake Purdy branch was about a half-mile up the river, and when we got there, we saw the shoal. The river was still a little high from a mid-week rain, the water a milky green. That was good, because if it was too clear, the fish would see us and lose interest in our fine worms.

As we got closer, we were met by the unmistakable smell of bedding bream, a smell sort of like fresh baby shit. We slipped quietly into an eddy to the left and just below the shoal, and Mary Lou dropped the mushroom-shaped anchor into the water and let it gently drift to the bottom. The water was about three feet deep where we stopped. The current in the eddy swung the canoe around, stern upstream.

We rigged our spinning tackle with #6 long-shank hooks and a single split shot about six inches above the hook. We each hooked a big fat worm once through the middle with the barb of the hook looped back over and buried just under the skin to prevent the bait from snagging on something. We cast our writhing bait into the shoal above the bedding yellowbellies. Just as our bait reached the pool below, our lines started moving across and back up the river. We reeled in the slack, set the hooks, and our rod tips bowed double.

Mary Lou's fish ran up into the shoal, mine down river, which saved us getting our lines all tangled up. It took a few minutes to get the fish to the canoe, longer than it would in a lake where the fish couldn't use the current as leverage. In the end, two exhausted hen shellcrackers, about a pound and a half each, turned belly up and found themselves in the bottom of the canoe. We caught five more in the next half hour, and then quit, having all we needed. The largest, a whopper, weighed just over two pounds; the smallest just over a pound.

We drove back to Mary Lou's, unloaded the canoe, and gave her mother the four middle-sized bream. Next, we drove over to Roland's and left the two smallest fish in a bag of ice on his doorstep. Then we went to my house with the two-pounder. I went out back to the outdoor sink where I always cleaned fish, scaled the big hen shellcracker with a spoon, slit her belly from throat to anus, sliced through the backbone, and broke her head

off, entrails attached. Then I sliced the backbone lengthwise and split her open, like a skillet-sized open-faced sandwich.

Back inside, I found Mary Lou making cornmeal batter for hushpuppy mix and for basting the fish. I went out to the garden and picked a bunch of fresh collard greens and a yellow rose for Mary Lou to wear in her hair. All that, along with a pot of Uncle Ben's Converted Rice, made a mighty fine dinner, better than any I ever ate in a restaurant.

For dessert I had delicious Mary Lou in Mom's bed. We lay there, I barely moving inside her for what seemed like an hour. It was different from ever before, but we didn't know how it was different, or why. We just knew it was and that something special was happening. All of a sudden, the blue glow I had seen over Mom just before Daddy came back for her was all around us.

Mary Lou exclaimed, "Oh Jesus, I feel like my mind's exploding!" and before I could say anything back to her, my mind exploded like a starburst, millions of stars. Then I had an orgasm that would have blown me out of the bed but for the fact that Mary Lou was having a similar orgasm and grabbed me with her legs and both arms, holding me to her as tightly as she could. We shook all over for at least a minute, and then I cried like a baby, feeling in my bones that Mom was gone. I lay sobbing in Mary Lou's arms until we fell asleep.



Weenie Mania

I kept up the garden until the house was sold that August to a family with two small children—a little boy and his younger sister. I showed the parents how to use the birds to do all the work and explained that if they ate mostly out of that garden, they wouldn't have to see the doctor or dentist very often.

Then I moved in with Grandmother where I stayed until I went off to study pre-law that September at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, about sixty miles west of Birmingham. Mary Lou went down to Auburn east of Montgomery, near the Alabama-Georgia line, to take undergraduate courses that she needed to get into the state veterinary school there.

Right away I got a job as handyman for a large apartment complex, and that and my studies kept me plenty busy and helped take my mind off missing Mary Lou so much. The job gave me \$100 per month and a one-bedroom apartment. That, along with interest on the proceeds from the house, was plenty to get me by.

I went through fraternity rush and got bids from several houses, but one, Phi Kappa Delta, which most of the kids didn't like, was the one I most liked and pledged. All the other fraternities called the Phi Kaps "ghosts" because they were sort of different—more into philosophy and politics than what "Bear" Bryant was doing with the Crimson Tide, the Alabama football team, named such because its colors were crimson and white.

After many years of waning under the hand of Coach J.B. "Ears" Whitworth, the Tide had finally earned a 0-10 record in 1958, leaving Tide fans limp.

The Bear Jesus came in 1959, and the worm turned fast. Led by a leatherneck quarterback, Pat Trammel, a Tide team of lean-and-mean midgets went out and shocked ponderous arch-rival Auburn 10-0 in 1960, predicting the Tide's perfect 10-0 record the following year, leaving its fans, including myself, euphoric.

I can still feel the thundering vibration that shook the stadium every time our cheerleaders opened a game by leading the student body with a deafening "Roooooooooooooollllllll, Tiiiiiiiiide, Roll!!!!" Even more moving were those highstepping Alabama 'backs, especially "Memphis" Mike Fracchia, ripping through gaping holes made by All-American tackle Billy Neighbors, scampering untouched fifty, sixty, seventy yards or more into the other teams' end zones. Equally enjoyable was the gritty Tide defense, led by All-American linebacker Leroy Jordon, stonewalling the other teams' offenses, not allowing a point in most games.

But the season ended with 'Bama eking out a lackluster 10-3 Sugar Bowl victory over an outmatched Arkansas Razorback team that the Tide should have beaten by thirty points. Rumor had it that Pat Trammel was displeased with the way practices were going, so the night before the game he beat up several of his teammates to adjust their attitudes. It was also rumored that this was not the first time Pat had done this. Winning was everything to him, like it was to Coach Bryant.



Although the football team and I got along very well, my fraternity and I did not. I very much liked the guys, but I soon realized I had joined a fraternity of drunks. I went

back and forth for several weeks about the best way to deal with the situation, often rehearsing out loud what I could say at one of the weekly chapter meetings, hoping to make them change. The words never came out of my mouth right, so I didn't say anything.

Then I remembered how Mom had handled her problem at the water works, and at the next weekly fraternity meeting I stood and told the brothers that while I liked them very much, after much thought I had decided to resign. Of course, they had questions, so I explained my concern about how much they drank. I said that I sincerely hoped they would heal what caused them to drink so much, and then I walked out of the meeting and never went back to the Phi Kap house. The "friends" I had made in the fraternity stayed away from me after that, and I was pretty lonely for a while.

Not long afterwards, the Phi Kap house burned to the ground. The rumor was that one of the brothers got drunk and tried to barbecue a chicken in his second-floor room on an hibachi. He threw gasoline on the fire out of a lawnmower can. The fire ran up into the can and blew it up, burning him badly and setting his room on fire. He probably would have died in the blaze if he hadn't jumped out of the window onto the roof of one of the brother's cars parked below.

It was also about that time that the Phi Delta Thetas next door got thrown off campus forever. One of the members made a habit of going around naked, shitting in lamp fixtures during fraternity parties, in plain view of the members' dates. That and similar antics that went unaddressed by the fraternity cooked its campus goose.



Mary Lou and I had agreed to date around in college, but we got together in Kundalina over school holidays, and during these times together we used up a whole bunch of Trojans. I never asked Mary Lou if she used Trojans down at Auburn, and she never asked me if I used them at Alabama. I wanted to ask but was afraid of what the answer might be.

Besides, I used a bunch of Trojans myself my freshman year with a sophomore named Wanda Sable whose father, a former Crimson Tide football player, owned a chain of drug stores in Montgomery. We knocked around for about six months, and she nearly fucked me to death. But the more I got to know her, the more troubled I felt for her and the less I wanted to be with her. I learned from her that during her freshman year she had slept with about half the Crimson Tide football team.

One day when we talked about our families, she shared that she had always had a terrible relationship with her father who had tried to make her into the son he never had, taking her bird hunting around Montgomery, big-game fishing at Destin, Florida, and preparing her to take over his business. I was not up to taking on her father and said that I thought she needed to find some way to get over her need for the approval he would never be able to give her, to heal the empty hole in her spirit that she spent a good deal of her waking life trying to fill.

She burst into tears and cried what seemed like an hour non-stop, although it probably wasn't over fifteen minutes. I carried her back to her dorm and walked her to the front door. Then I went down to the pizza parlor near my apartment for dinner. I sat at the counter, eating alone. Nearby were a bunch of rowdy boys about my age. I didn't know if they were in a fraternity, but one of them told a joke—a little too loud perhaps, given how many girls were in the place—that I'll never forget.

"What do you call a whore with a runny nose?" he blurted.

Nobody, including myself, had any idea. He waited, but no one even tried a guess.

"Give up?" he asked, with a smirk.

His friends all nodded. One of them, a really fat fellow with a quart bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon and almost a whole eighteen-inch pizza in front of him, demanded, "What's the punch line, asshole?"

"Full!" he laughed.

It was dead silent for a moment, then one of his friends burst out laughing, and the fat one spewed a mouthful of beer and pizza across the table, all over the front of the joke teller. The other guys just sat there with blank looks on their faces.

A girl at a nearby table, who had been eavesdropping, retched, "Oh, gross! That's the grossest thing I ever heard!"

I nearly choked on the mouthful of pizza I had just swallowed, putting me into the most awful hiccups instead. The place was never the same for me after that, because every time I went in there I remembered dead-empty Wanda who ended up dropping out of school and moving out to California to be a park ranger in a redwood forest.

After that, I didn't date other girls except as friends. I didn't tell Mary Lou about my decision to be monogamous because I was afraid she would say something like, "That's nice, but I'm having too much fun fucking other men to be faithful myself," which probably meant that she was sucking their dicks, too, and just the thought of her doing that gave me the shaking willies.



Every now and then Mary Lou came with her girlfriends to Tuscaloosa for a weekend, and sometimes I hitchhiked over to Auburn to spend a weekend with her. Unable to afford the insurance and upkeep on Mom's car, I had sold it, and since Mary Lou never had a car herself, we didn't make many of those weekend trips.

One of those weekends during my second year made such a big impression on me that I will share it here. It was the weekend that the Tide, led by its sensational sophomore quarterback, Joe Namath, went over to Atlanta to kick Georgia Tech's butt, leaving the campus more quiet than usual since half of the student body went over for the slaughter.

This thing I want to tell you about began Friday night when I had a really bizarre dream. In the dream, Mary Lou and I were at the Alabama-Auburn game up at Legion Field in Birmingham, sitting butt-naked on the twenty-fifth row of the fifty-yard line, absolutely perfect seats. We were the only fans in the stadium. The Tide scored, I got an erection, and Mary Lou started panting and straddled me. Just as I was about to stick it in Auburn scored, my erection withered, and Mary Lou got really pissed. This maddening scenario repeated several times. Finally, the game ended with Auburn ahead, my pecker the size of a small red worm, and Mary Lou sashaying naked toward the Auburn dressing room.

I awoke in a panic, turned on the light, looked between my legs, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. Mary Lou, of all the luck, was awake and watching. She laughed her fool head off. I didn't tell her about the dream. Hell, I never told her about it—it was too damn embarrassing.

The next day we went for a long walk along the Warrior River, which runs beside Tuscaloosa. The football team and its fans held their own brand of religious services in Atlanta, and rather disappointing services at that. Georgia Tech won 7-6 when Joe Namath was tackled at the

goal line attempting a two-point conversion at the end of the game. After the dream of the night before, I wasn't too concerned about the loss. I was plenty concerned about my dick not working, though. But that night it seemed to work just fine, and boy, was I relieved!

The next week, I changed my major from English to psychology.



What I'm about to say next won't win me any popularity awards with Crimson Tide fans, but I'm going to say it anyway, not because I don't like Coach Bryant, but because I finally realized the poor man wasn't really Jesus. He was just an ordinary human being—a great football coach but also a man in great pain, which he pretty much kept to himself, as best as I can tell, by acting tougher than everybody else around.

Paul W. Bryant had grown up a poor Arkansas farm boy, devoted to his mother but little is mentioned of his father. In his teens, he earned his nickname wrestling a mangey muzzled bear in a carnival for money. A few years later, "Bear" gave 110 percent as an end of modest ability on the Alabama football team, before becoming a win-at-all-cost football coach. His patented "Winning isn't everything but it sure beats what comes in second!" became a household saying overnight in Alabama after he started coaching there.

A huge football success, the Bear was also a drunk. I discovered this sad-but-true fact watching "The Bear Bryant Show." Each Sunday afternoon during football season, he mumbled a narration of the television replay of the previous day's game. The program was sponsored by Coca Cola and Golden Flake Potato Chips—"Great pair," says the Bear." While it was rumored that he owned both

companies, whose sales probably skyrocketed after being endorsed by the next best thing to God, it was crystal clear that there was something in those Cokes besides ice. But nobody seemed to care—the Bear walked on water.

Besides a fondness for whiskey, rumor had it that Coach Bryant liked the ladies. Now, adultery wasn't something you talked about in those days, not if you wanted to stay alive—maybe even these days you don't talk about it if you want to stay alive. But it was all right to talk about his drinking because just about all Tide men did plenty of that. They chased women, too, but that wasn't okay to talk about back then either, except sometimes when it was really important.

For instance, a story got out about one of the Bear's good friends, a rabid Tide fan in Tuscaloosa named "Deacon." He really liked the ladies, and everybody but his wife knew about his shenanigans. Eventually, though, she figured it out and made her move.

Deacon was flying out of town from Birmingham on Eastern Airlines to watch an Alabama football game. He had just gotten comfortable in his seat, when guess what? Onto the plane marched his wife and teenage daughter and confronted him as he sat trapped in his seat holding a scotch-and-water in one hand and his trophy girlfriend's hand in the other.

Because adultery was a hanging offense in Alabama divorce courts, even for men with ministerial-sounding names, Deacon got himself skinned good and proper. The funny thing was that all during the divorce proceedings he begged his wife to forgive him, to take him back. Said he was terribly sorry—that he couldn't live without her, that he would die without her. Of course, she wasn't having any of that, so she divorced him. Then he upped and died of a heart attack.

I got to wondering if drinking and sex were somehow related to winning football games, because that sacred

"trinity" ran together at Alabama and even down at Auburn—the state agricultural college and thus the brunt of many mean cross-state-rival jokes. One joke, especially, was popular on the Alabama campus:

A fellow graduated from high school and went down to "the Plains," as Auburn was called, leaving his high school sweetheart at home. About six weeks later he came home for a weekend visit. Right away he took her out to the woods where they had spent plenty of time before he went off to Auburn. But when they parked and he tried to get her into the back seat, she wouldn't have it. Try as he might, he couldn't get into her britches.

Exasperated, he asked her what was the matter, but she wouldn't say. This made him mad and he told her that if she didn't tell him what in the hell was going on, then he was going to put her out of the car and leave her. Faced with that likelihood, she said, "Well, I know about you Auburn boys."

"What do you mean by that?" he growled.

"You know damn well what I mean!" she retorted.

"The hell I do, and if you don't come clean right this minute, then your ass is walking home. Count on it!"

Seeing that she had no choice, she said, "Well, you boys go off to Auburn and then you start screwing sheep, goats, pigs, cows, horses and turkeys!"

He looked surprised, and was quiet for several moments, then exclaimed, "Turkeys???"

Winning football games wasn't enough to make Alabama fans feel that Tide weenies were big enough. They had to make Auburn fans feel that there was something wrong with their weenies as well!



The Lady

Since the Bear was sort of like God and Alabama was sort of like Earth, I wondered if I could get to the bottom of the sacred football, booze and sex "trinity" by studying the divine Bear hisownself—as above so below. That resulted in my giving a lot of thought to why young Paul Bryant had wrestled that bear. Surely there were better ways to make money or prove he was a man. Why a bear? What was that mangey old bear really about?

I had often heard the phrases "mother bear" and "she bear," so I did some research in the campus library on bears, and guess what I found? That the Latin for bear, *ursa*, is feminine. I read up on the mythology of bears and there it was again, a female symbol. Holy mother of Jesus, was the budding Bear Jesus himself looking for his own mother in that bear? Why would he want to do something like that when he already had such a nice momma?

I remembered Mom's last piece in the *Birmingham Herald* about the female aspects of being—about women becoming women. And there was also Dad's letter, which I suppose I should go ahead and share with you instead of keeping you longer in suspense simply because writers are supposed to do that with their readers. Anyway, here is the part of Dad's letter that I figured had something to do with this female stuff:

You need to become a lawyer, son. The law is one of the main arenas in which people vent their deep feelings

of impotency through legal battling. The more they joust, the more they fight instead of peacefully resolving their differences, the more they fight instead of looking inward to see how they themselves have contributed to their legal problems, then the worse they eventually feel.

If fighting to resolve conflict continues, then some very unfortunate things are going to happen on this planet—cataclysms that will dwarf anything ever before experienced on Earth. Life will be drastically changed, perhaps even come to an end. Many people—some of Earth origin, others like us originally from other places and even from other dimensions—are working to avoid this result, because if it happens, more than just Earth will be affected. A delicate balance exists between Earth and the other heavenly bodies in this solar system, between this solar system and other solar systems in this particular universe, and between this universe and the other universes.

I volunteered for this worthy task, but I may not be able to complete it because of a terrible war, a war caused by some really fouled-up men. I must do what I can to end the war as quickly as possible, and yet I myself may be killed in it. If that happens, then your mother and others will train you to complete my assignment.

I hope you do not have to finish my work, but know, my dear son, that it is a worthy undertaking, that you will do a great service to all beings in the Creation by completing my mission if I cannot. If I do not return, then I will be waiting when you finish our work and we will have good talks—the talks we never had on Earth.

Your loving father

Although Mom and Dad had seemed to understand this female business very well, I didn't have all that good a grasp on it. After all, when I looked at myself in the mirror

after taking a shower each morning, there dangling between my legs was clear proof that I was a man.



A huge piece finally fell into place the first semester of my senior year. My contemporary psychology professor, Dr. Rankin, was really big on the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung. He said that Dr. Jung had done more to integrate the mystery of the human psyche with the divine than any person in Western civilization, except perhaps Jesus.

So I trotted over to the school library and found Dr. Jung's recently published autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, which Dr. Rankin had mentioned in class. Right there before me on the printed page was a lucid description of the male and female sides of the human psyche. Jung was quite candid about some of his own inner struggles, and if it were not for something that dawned on me one day while I lay soaking in a hot bath after relieving my deep longing for Mary Lou by hand pussy, I suppose Carl Jung probably would have become my own personal Jesus.

What dawned on me was something Jung had shared about his confrontation with his own "unconscious," as he called the parts of the psyche that are there but that most people don't know about. Being a physician, he felt way out on a limb doing work that could not be proven in a laboratory. And yet he thought his subtle and often subjective work was every bit as scientific as other aspects of medicine. It was quite an inner struggle for him, that intensified when a voice inside him said, "That is art," referring to his work.

Dismayed, Jung took this as a suggestion that his work was not science. Then one day he concluded that the voice was the negative feminine side of his own psyche

trying to trick him into abandoning his manly work. He saw the whole thing as a temptation, a cosmic joke, and the next time he heard, "That is art," he took strong issue with the voice and eventually won the argument. His work later became accepted as a science.

I was somewhat of an amateur artist myself, thanks to Mom. In fact, I had entered my work in the art exhibit at the Alabama State Fair several years running before her death and had won a few honorable mentions. After Mom's passing, I furiously painted dark, bizarre paintings for several weeks. Then one day I painted a saucy mockingbird with a long-stem yellow rose in its beak. Something shifted inside, and I didn't feel like painting again until I started worrying about what Mary Lou was doing down at Auburn.

It took months to work that one out, and let me tell you, it was no fun at all painting what I imagined Mary Lou was doing with those Auburn boys and what they were doing to her, especially since I knew she was loving every minute of it. Some of the things I painted were downright disgusting.

Then one day I painted this really bizarre piece—a fat black cottonmouth coming toward me out of a big vagina. But instead of a cottonmouth's head, the snake had the upper body of a beautiful blond woman, full breasts bared, arms outstretched, beckoning anyone looking at the painting to make love to her. Not long afterward I stopped worrying about Mary Lou's private life and burned the paintings in the incinerator out back of the apartment complex.

Well, since art had been so helpful to my own psychic comfort, I wondered why Jung had been so troubled to hear that his work was art. Indeed, why did it have to be either one or the other, why not both? What was wrong with art, with being creative, with being . . . gulp! feminine?

Damn, did Jung have problems with the size of his own weenie? Did he have to prove himself to the scientific community, nearly an exclusive men's club? Instead of achieving an inner synthesis between art and science and thus between his own masculine and feminine sides, did Jung choose the masculine over the feminine?

Indeed, Sigmund Freud and Jung, once close friends, had a big falling out. Freud thought Jung had a bunch of sexual hangups—but then, Freud thought everybody had a bunch of sexual hangups—and that really infuriated Jung. The fact was, though, Jung had a longstanding affair with Toni Wolff, one of his women patients, and he was known to have had sex with many of his women patients, reaching, I supposed at the time, for the feminine he hadn't found within himself.

Screwing patients was a cardinal sin in psychiatry, grounds for loss of membership in the medical-scientific men's club. Jung must have been desperately divorced from his own feminine to risk his medical license and all the male approval he had worked so hard to achieve, just for a little strange pussy. If he never healed the sexual split in himself, what did that say about his disciples and patients? Again, as above so below.



My interest in this weenie business peaked, so to speak, when Dr. Rankin, a burly man with dark bushy eyebrows and a thick wavy head of hair who often shared in class his aspirations and frustrations as an amateur writer, went off on a tangent one day about literary symbolism and metaphor. He said that really good writers wrote on many levels so that readers of varied intelligence and understanding would all find something valuable in the work.

I didn't know much about what other writers thought when they wrote, but I was reminded of Jesus' parables. Each story contained something important that Jesus said some people would grasp whereas others would not. I thought this was probably an example of what Dr. Rankin meant about communicating on various levels.

I was also reminded that Jesus told his disciples that he taught them directly, without shielding the truth behind parable. So I wondered if the best writers used symbolism and metaphor to obscure the truth or if they had some more important reason.

It was obvious in the New Testament that Jesus shifted to telling parables because of the adverse reaction he got to his direct teachings. It stood to reason that good writers also cloaked their messages to avoid the hassle that resulted from telling it like it was, even to save their very necks in some cases. When I raised this possibility in class, Dr. Rankin paused a few moments, pursed his lips and appeared deep in thought before answering:

"A good point, Mr. Strange. Certainly there is some truth to what you say about the cost, indeed, the risk of telling it straight, so to speak. But I think there is something else that you may not see. You overlook the fact that there is something intangible about symbolism and metaphor that penetrates the reader in ways that direct talk cannot. This is because every reader has certain biases, prejudices, psychological defenses, if you will, that automatically thwart a direct approach in most cases. But these guardians of the psyche do not always recognize the truths buried in symbolism and metaphor, and thus the truth gets in through the back door."

He paused and looked thoughtful. "That is all I wish to say, and I look forward to reading your further thoughts on this in your term paper!"

I pondered Dr. Rankin's words for many days, but I still felt something missing. Indeed, I wondered if writers

who intentionally wrote with hidden meaning did not actually deceive themselves much like Jung had deceived himself by thinking that his work was all science, to the exclusion of art?

I reasoned that if most writers were like Jung, unaware of their own inner truth, then any symbolism and metaphor they *consciously* used was automatically suspect and most likely untrustworthy, an unconscious diversion from the truth. In that case, I would learn far more by discerning the writers' blind spots than I would ever learn from what they consciously intended.

This, without of course any mention of the Bear or the size of his or other Alabama weenies, became the basis of my term paper, "The Search for Manhood in Literature." In it, I diagnosed several respected male novelists—Hemingway, Faulkner, Melville and Tolstoy—to demonstrate not what they intended to say, but what their writing really showed: a deep sense of inadequacy caused by an unresolved inner war against the female side of themselves, a war that made them all write like madmen and made their women—both in their books and in their lives—feel like dead-empty Wanda.



Kindred Spirits

My essay came back from Dr. Rankin marked "A," accompanied by a handwritten note: "Novel and thought-provoking. I would like to talk with you further if you have time."

I called and made an appointment for the next afternoon. When we met, Dr. Rankin looked nervous. Such a big man, it was hard to imagine how he could be a psychology professor instead of a football coach. I mean, weren't psychologists supposed to be little, shifty, beady-eyed men wearing horn-rimmed glasses?

"I want to tell you again how much I liked your paper. I can truly say it turned me upside down, which tells me that you probably are right on the money," he said, surprising me with his openness.

"Thanks," I replied, "but was there anything in particular about the paper that really struck you?"

"Yes—your treatment of the unconscious symbolism in *Moby Dick*. All the religious symbolism everybody sees in the book? You shot that down pretty well, saying that the great white sperm whale represented Ahab's, thus Melville's, lost manhood which he left his family on land to chase high and low through the sea, the emotional aspect of the "Feminine Mother," never marrying her, never achieving his goal, only to first lose his leg to the whale, then finally his life by drowning in the Feminine Mother after his remaining good leg snagged in the serpentine line

attached to his own puny harpoon. Quite an interesting treatment, I would say. Quite interesting indeed!"

Not knowing what to say, I said nothing.

"I'm curious about something, though, but perhaps you would prefer not to talk about it."

"Ask and let me decide," I offered.

"I'm sure many men share these inner realities but can never talk about them because of the stigma attached," he said, then fell silent.

I sensed Dr. Rankin's hesitation, so I asked if he wanted to say more.

"Well, it's sort of embarrassing, but I had a very disturbing dream the night after I read your paper."

"Care to share it?"

"You see, I really like to fish. Anyway, in the dream I was fishing down in the backwaters near my home where I grew up in Huntsville, just off the Tennessee River. I was fishing for anything that would bite, using night crawlers. You know what they are?"

"Sure, I've used plenty of them myself. Great all-round bait."

"Yeah, they sure are. Anyway, as I baited up, I saw this really large bass bedding next to a stump in about three foot of water. This hawg had to go at least ten pounds, the biggest I'd ever seen. I flipped the worm over her way—bass that big are always female, but I suppose you know that, yes?"

"Yeah, I know. Biggest I ever caught was seven pounds; caught it on a Jitterbug one night in the Cahaba River."

"Well, my biggest before that was five pounds and I caught it on a shiner. Anyway, this baby took the worm and then fought me tooth and nail for what seemed like half an hour. Just as I got her to the boat and was slipping my landing net under her, out from under the boat slithered this enormous moccasin—must have been ten

foot long—and swallowed the bass, scaring the liver out of me. But that was nothing, because just after that the snake came after me, cotton-white mouth wide open, foot-long pearly fangs arching for my throat. Then I awoke, gagging, terrified."

"Have you ever had any such experiences yourself?" he asked, hoping no doubt that he wasn't alone.

I told him about the cottonmouth on the dam just before Mary Lou and I made love for the first time, and then about the painting I had done when I was so bothered by what she might be doing down at Auburn.

"Well, do you have any idea what my dream means?" Dr. Rankin asked.

"Maybe. But what do you think?"

"After reading your paper, I see the snake as having something to do with sex and the fall of man—at the hands of a woman. And that fish—well, the fish in Christianity represents the Christ, the salvation of man, and I sure wanted that fish real bad didn't I?"

"Seems so."

"Anything else important about that buster bass?" I asked.

"She sure would have given me bragging rights."

"With whom?"

"All my fishing buddies."

"They're all men, right?"

"Right."

"Your father's a fisherman?" I asked on a hunch.

"You guessed it. He's the one that taught me to fish."

"He ever catch a bass that big?"

"Nope, his biggest is six pounds."

I didn't know what to say next. Dr. Rankin twitched nervously in his chair. The silence mounted. Finally, he blurted, "Damn, I've never beaten him at anything, never measured up!"

I asked him to say more about his relationship with his father. He said his father had been a good athlete and later excelled in the dry cleaning business in Huntsville. Wanting a legacy, he had pushed his son to be like him.

"All I ever wanted to do was write, but Dad said I needed to 'be a man and quit all that sissy stuff,'" Dr. Rankin said, looking very sad.

"And so do you write now?" I asked.

"A lot, but I keep it under lock and key."

"Ever have anything published?"

"No, never even submitted anything. Always afraid it would be rejected."

"By whom?"

"The editors, of course."

"Oh, I thought perhaps it was your father's rejection of your writing that you feared."

He gave me the strangest look, then glanced away to hide tears welling in his eyes. I suggested that he submit some of his work and let the chips fall where they may.

"By golly, I believe you are right!" he said, slamming his fist on this desk. He jumped up, walked excitedly around his desk, walked over and looked out his window, and then sat back down.

"I can tell you this: I've never had such an eye-opening experience!" he exclaimed.

"I believe you," I said, standing to excuse myself.

"Before you leave, there's one thing more," he interjected.

"What's that?"

"What do you plan to do after you graduate?"

"Go to law school."

"May I suggest something else?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"May I suggest that you give serious thought to the field of psychiatry, or, and I don't know exactly why I say this, but perhaps even the ministry?"

Well, that took me back. I had known that I would be a lawyer since I read Dad's letter on the sparkling rock. Yet, as I stood there, mouth agape, looking at Dr. Rankin, I sensed that I just might not be a lawyer after all.

"Dr. Rankin, you've given me much to think about, too. It looks as if we may have done each other a favor," I said, then shook his hand and left.



Lawyers

The day after my talk with Dr. Rankin, I went over to the law school to talk with the dean, Paul Blake. He was a stately man in the mold of a true southern gentleman. I had already taken the Law School Admission Test and he had the results in my application file.

"I see you scored very well on your LSAT," he said. "You should have no trouble here if you apply yourself."

I was more concerned about whether or not the law was the right vocation for me than I was with my ability to make good grades. After Abner Mills, I never felt good about lawyers.

"What is it like practicing law?" I asked.

"Well, I've heard it can be pretty taxing," he replied.

"You haven't practiced yourself?"

"No, I've been a law professor all my working life."

"And the other professors—have any of them practiced law?"

"One was a lawyer in the military for several years, and one other, Dr. Avery, actually practiced awhile here in Tuscaloosa before he joined our faculty."

"Well, that concerns me," I said.

"How's that?"

"I mean, how can you teach me to be a lawyer if you've never done it yourself?"

"Well, we teach you how to think like a lawyer, how to write properly, how to do research, and then you learn the rest from the law firm you join after you graduate."

Some of our students clerk for law firms while in school, and those who do learn a great deal about the practice of law."

I thanked him for his time and wandered around the school until I found Dr. Avery's office. I asked if I could speak with him a few minutes over my concerns about whether I should study law. He showed a toothy grin and an almost sinister gleam in his eye, and invited me in.

"So you want to be a lawyer?" he asked.

"I'm not sure if I do or not. Dean Blake said you tried it awhile and then became a law professor. Mind telling me why?"

"Not at all. I defended a Negro man charged with raping a five-year-old white girl. He was totally innocent, nowhere around when she was assaulted at her home. He was her family's yard man, so he was a natural suspect. There were plenty of witnesses—unfortunately for him all Negro—who gave him an airtight alibi. Yet the medical evidence was unequivocal. The child had indeed been raped.

"I was pretty sure her father was the assailant, but hell, had I proven it, I might have been shot by some KKK type, or had my house burned. I couldn't risk trying to prove it was the father, so I relied on the alibi evidence. The jury rejected it and convicted my client. I appealed the case, but the Supreme Court of Alabama affirmed the conviction and my client went to the electric chair. I wrote the court a letter telling them that they would never see me before them again, that I could not practice law before a bench that had no guts."

I looked at this defeated man, a man who tried to do the right thing, but who had been beaten down by racism, injustice and his own fear. I didn't know what to say, so I just sat there saying nothing.

Then he said, "Riley, being a lawyer is really difficult because you have to wear so many hats. Not only do you

have to know how to fight, you also have to be a master psychologist. You'll spend half your time dealing with clients' emotional problems. Even more important, you have to be a priest, because clients' legal problems inevitably bring them face-to-face with their relationship with God. Some of the things clients have experienced are so terrible, so traumatic, that nothing you can do will really help, even if you win their case hands down. I mean, how do you heal what that little girl lost or what my client went through? Only God can heal those things."

I really didn't know what else to say. There it was, right in front of me: a savvy law professor telling me about God. Still, I thought I needed to do more "research" before making my final decision.



I went back to my apartment, got out the telephone directory, and turned to the "Attorneys and Counselors at Law" section of the yellow pages. There were quite a few listings, but the name "Wingo, Haverstead and Peterson" beckoned. I called and asked for Mr. Wingo. When his secretary answered, I told her my name was "Jake Carruthers" and I had a legal problem to discuss with her boss. She gave me an appointment for the next afternoon.

I arrived about fifteen minutes early, so I took a seat to wait. The reception area was nice: maroon carpeting, dark leather furniture, framed fox-hunting scenes on the walls. One wall contained bookshelves full of law books. I selected one, a textbook named *Judicial Remedies*, and opened it right to a case styled *In Re Turkeys*.

The case involved a lawsuit between adjoining landowners. One landowner owned a few turkeys that habitually wandered onto the other landowner's property and ate his grain crops. The injured party, the "plaintiff,"

filed an injunction lawsuit asking the court to order the turkey-owner "defendant" to stop his turkeys from crossing the property line. The court, in a lofty opinion that weighed the legal arguments and examined case precedents and legislative laws, decided to follow higher law. In ruling for the turkey-owner defendant, the court said, "We take judicial cognizance of the habit of a turkey to wander here and there. This is an innate attribute of a turkey, one designed by a power higher than this court and therefore not a matter into which this court should intrude. Judgment for the defendant with costs assessed against the plaintiff."

As I wondered how many legal cases were like this, where the laws of man ran head-on into the Laws of God, Mr. Wingo's secretary called me from the waiting-room door. I followed her back to Mr. Wingo's office, which looked like a small law library itself—books on three walls, a huge mahogany desk at one end, a fine conference table and matching high-back chairs at the other, and in the middle, a leather sofa and matching Queen Anne chairs. It reminded me of Abner Mills' office.

A bantam-rooster man of about sixty, Mr. Wingo rose to meet me. We shook hands and he invited me to sit on the sofa and took a chair beside me.

"What has brought you to see me, Mr. Carruthers?" he asked.

"Well, I think I got myself a legal problem and I was told you were a pretty fair lawyer and I should come talk to you about fixing it," I said.

"Who referred you to me?" he asked.

"Dean Blake over at the law school. I saw him first because I didn't know no lawyers and I figured he could tell me who was a good one," I said.

"I'll have to give Paul a call and thank him for the referral. Now tell me about this matter, this thing you think is a legal problem."

"You see, my mother died a couple of months ago and she left behind a lot of land down in south Alabama. Now it seems there's oil under it—lots of oil. Anyways, my brother and sister—they're older than me—well, they hired old lawyer Jackson up on Broad Street. You know him?"

"Sure, I know Brad. Known him for years, ever since I started practicing here in Tuscaloosa."

"Well, your knowin' him so well bothers me some then," I said.

"Why's that."

"Because he's in cahoots with my brother and sister; the three of them are trying to screw me out of my one-third of the land and oil."

"How come you think that?" Mr. Wingo asked, eyes narrowing.

"Because the week before Mom died she signed a will made by Mr. Jackson—she never had no will before that. Anyhow, she signed this will about which I didn't know nothin', and in it she give everything to my brother and sister."

"And were you and your mother estranged."

"What does that mean, 'estranged'?" I asked.

"It means, were you 'on the outs' with each other."

"Oh, yes sir, we was definitely on the outs," I said.

"And do you mind telling me why?"

"No, sir. We was on the outs with each other because I told her my brother and sister found oil on her land and were tryin' to sell it to an oil company without her or me knowing nothin' about it—that they had Lawyer Jackson helpin' them. She didn't know nothin' about the oil, so she asked them about it and they denied it flat out—lied they did. Later she talked to lawyer Jackson and he said he didn't know nothin' about it. She came back to me and said I was lyin'. I told her to call Tidewater Oil Company in Mobile and see for herself. That was the company tryin' to buy the oil rits. She told me she'd do it,

but I know she never did. If she called, she would have got the truth. I know, because I called Tidewater myself and talked to the owner, Mr. Raiford Anderson, and he told me himself that he was tryin' to buy the oil rigs to Mom's land and that he was dealin' with Lawyer Jackson about it when she died.

"I think that's what killed Mom. She just couldn't deal with it and she had a stroke. It was after the stroke they got her to sign the will. I don't believe she could even write by then. If you look at the way she signed that will, you can see it don't look like her regular handwritin', like maybe they held her hand or maybe even wrote her name for her.

"Well, that's the story. Can you help?"

Mr. Wingo looked distressed, the sort of gutless look I had expected he would develop after being put in a position of taking a lead-pipe-cinch big-money lawsuit against a fellow lawyer. I stared stupidly at him, saying nothing.

Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "Mr. Carruthers, I do not think we can help you with this case. It is our firm's policy not to sue other lawyers."

"And why is that?" I asked, dumbly.

"Because we lawyers have to live with each other. I suggest you take this matter up with the state bar association and let it deal with Lawyer Jackson."

"What if I just forget about Lawyer Jackson—will you take the case against my brother and sister?" I honed in, knowing almost certainly that the answer would be "yes." After all, if you weren't really a man, the next best thing to winning the national championship was winning the legal lottery, right?

I called Mary Lou that night and told her I changed my mind about being a lawyer. She was delighted. She never had liked Abner Mills, either.



Psychiatrists

So, was I cut out to be a mind doctor? Although I was in my fourth year of college, I had only taken a year of biology and it would take at least a year of additional study to complete the other science courses I would need to get into med school. After strolling a few times past Bryce Hospital, the state psychiatric hospital hardly a mile from my apartment, and seeing the "detainees" wandering around the grounds, standing with hands gripping the black steel bars of the perimeter fence, staring longingly out—well, it nearly broke my heart. I wanted to help them.

Yet how could I know for certain that this was my calling, never having been acquainted with a doctor of the mind other than Dr. Jung? So I opened the Tuscaloosa yellow pages and looked under "Physicians and Surgeons" for psychiatrists and found but two. Then I looked in a Birmingham directory and hit the jackpot. There must have been fifty psychiatrists listed.

I scanned the listings, looking for one that caught my eye. One, the John Clay Clinic, beckoned. I called and made an appointment for the following Tuesday afternoon.

Tuesday morning I hitchhiked to Birmingham and caught a bus from downtown out to the clinic on the south side of town. The Sears, Roebuck-furnished reception area and the glassy-eyed waiting patients depressed me right away. I filled out the new patient form using the name Jake Carruthers and a New Merkle address. Within a few minutes, the receptionist took me to Dr. Zarensky, a

distinguished man of East European extraction who mumbled English in a heavy accent.

He asked who had referred me, and I replied, "The yellow pages." I told him I didn't have a doctor, that I had never needed one before.

When he asked why I needed one now, I said, "I've been very depressed. I can't concentrate on my studies, I sleep just a couple hours a night, and I'm losing weight. I don't have any explanation for it. I'm not worried about anything in particular, and nothing bad's happened to me lately, although my mother died about four years ago and my father was killed in World War II when I was just a toddler boy."

He said, "I think we need to do a complete physical examination to rule out an organic cause, and you should take some tests to give us a better idea of what's going on with you psychologically."

"Probably," I said, "but I'm a student and have very little money and no medical insurance. I don't know if I can afford all that. Can you tell me what all this will cost—the examination and the tests, I mean. And also, what does it cost for me to see you here?"

"Well, the exam will probably run, with blood tests and that sort of thing, around \$200. The psychological tests, another \$100. And I charge \$75 an hour for my time."

"Dr. Zarensky, I just can't afford all that. Can't you just give me something to help me with my depression?"

"Well, if you are really that depressed, we could try some antidepressant medication, and if it works, we can assume we're on the right track."

"I think I need that, sir. I mean, I'm really depressed."

Dr. Zarensky didn't give me a second glance before he wrote out a prescription for thorazine. He walked me to the waiting room, and as I paid his bill in cash, he told his

receptionist, "Call University Hospital, Third Wing North and tell them I'll be late making my rounds today."

"What's Third Wing North?" I asked.

He leaned over and whispered, "That's where we send our hospital patients who can't afford Hillcrest, the private psychiatric hospital in town."

I thanked him and hitchhiked back to Tuscaloosa.



Next Thursday I hitchhiked back up to Birmingham. After my ride let me off downtown, I took two thorazine tablets and caught a bus to University Hospital. By the time I found Third Wing North, in the old Hillman Hospital building where I had been born, the world was closing in on me. The receptionist checked me in with little fuss.

Dr. Zarensky dropped by the next day around lunch.

"I got suicidal, Dr. Zarensky," I mumbled. "The medication made me feel really depressed and sleepy."

"Drowsiness often happens when you first start, but you should not have gotten more depressed. This concerns me. We need to do those examinations and tests."

"I still can't afford them. Can't they be done here at the State's expense?"

"Not unless you are under the care of a University psychiatrist who is authorized by the State to do that."

"Oh."

"Well, maybe it's situational, whatever it is. Perhaps a rest here for a few days will do some good. I'll check on you Monday and we will go from there. If this doesn't change soon, you might want to consider a series of electroshock treatments. We find it very helpful in depression of unknown origin cases," he offered.

"Oh?"

"Of course, we only do it as a last resort, because of side effects such as memory loss and a flattening of the personality, but overall it's really quite a good procedure."

"Well, let's put that on the back burner for now, and see if we can get at this another way," I suggested.

"Fine, I'll see you here when I make my Monday morning rounds."



On Friday night, I played crazy eights with one of the nurses. She skillfully led me to talk about myself, and I made up several good stories that held her interest.

After an hour of that, I asked, "Do you enjoy spending your day trying to figure out why someone like me is in here?" She gave a poker-faced response, waiting for me to say something revealing. "I mean, all the time we've been playing this silly card game, you've been trying to get into my head without me knowing it. What I want to know is, do you like doing that? I ask because I can't imagine how you could enjoy it."

She said she needed to check on her other patients and left.

I turned my attention to another patient, a happy-go-lucky fellow who looked to be in his mid-twenties. We played a game of ping-pong and he was pretty good. After splitting four games, we sat down to talk. He asked why I was "in" and I said, "Depression—suicidal depression. But it must be something situational because I don't feel suicidal now that I'm here. What about you? Why are you here?"

"Well, I just couldn't take the pressure anymore. I needed a break."

"What kind of pressure?"

"From my girlfriends. I've got three, and they all found out about each other. I couldn't deal with the flack."

"Gosh, I bet they are pretty mad," I offered.

"You'd better believe it."

"What kind of medication do they have you on?" I asked.

"Valium."

"Does it help?"

"Yeah, I don't worry very much when I'm on it."

"You like football?" I changed the subject.

"Alabama football."

"Yeah, me too. Roll Tide!"

"Right on, Roll Tide!"

Later, I saw the nurse, the one who played crazy eights, talking with him and doing a lot of looking my way.



The next morning, I took up with Allison, a stoop-shouldered woman of about thirty. She had stringy brown hair, big round eyes, and a thin mouth locked in a permanent grimace. We swapped stories, and I learned that she had been seeing a private woman psychiatrist, a Dr. Carlisle. She said that she had gone to Dr. Carlisle because she suffered from an acute fear of being ripped apart and eaten at night by a supernatural beast.

"I am so afraid of it that I sleep with a light on in the hallway outside my bedroom. That keeps it away."

"And was Dr. Carlisle able to help you?"

"Hell, no, she nearly killed me!"

"How did she do that, give you too many drugs?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. She told me to go home to my lonely apartment, let the beast come to me, and then kill it in the worst way I knew how. She made me tell her how I would do it—what would be the worst way I could

kill the beast—and I said that it would be to tear its throat out with my teeth. Anyway, I went home that night, ate dinner, turned out the lights, sat in the middle of my bed with my back to the door of my bedroom—the beast always came at me from behind—and waited, just like Dr. Carlisle told me to do.

"Before long, I felt the beast coming up behind me, huge, sharp teeth, saliva dripping out of its mouth, angry, red eyes, long, matted reddish hair, big claws. It was intense. I felt my skin crawl like it would come off me. I turned around to face it and fainted. The next thing I knew, it was morning. I was a wreck. I crawled to the telephone and called my mother. She came and brought me here. I've been here ever since."

"You on drugs?" I asked.

"Yeah, they gave me valium; it calms me down."

"Where's your father?" I asked out of curiosity.

"He lives in North Carolina, I think. Haven't seen him since he ran out on Mom and me when I was four."

"How do you know he ran out on you?"

"Mom told me he did."

"Allison, I lost my father in the war and I think I understand how your father's leaving must have hurt you," I said.

"Yeah, it really did, and I hate him for it."

"I expect you do, but I'm curious about this beast of yours."

"Yeah, in what way?"

"Does it resemble your father whom you hate so much?"

"No, it doesn't. In fact, it isn't a man beast; it's female."

"How do you know that?"

"Can't explain it. Just know it's female."

"Well, does anybody you know have reddish hair?"

"Sure, my mother—and Dr. Carlisle!" she gasped, as a look of terror came over her face.



The next morning, Sunday, I packed my things to leave. The nurse I had played mind-fuck with saw me walking down the hall, overnight bag in hand.

"And where are you off to?" she asked with a big smile.

"I'm going home. I feel better like Dr. Zarensky said I might. It must be something situational."

"Don't you think you should wait until tomorrow, until you see him again?" she suggested.

"No, I'll call him if I need him."

"I don't think you should leave yet," she pressed.

"Well, I appreciate your concern, but I checked myself in here, and now I'm checking myself out. You'll just have to find someone else to try to figure out."

I stepped into the next elevator, paid my bill in cash, and hitchhiked back to Tuscaloosa.

I had made my decision. I would go to seminary. There was just something about those towering church steeples that reminded me of weenies.



Ministers

As you already know from having read this far, Mom never had much use for churches. She felt about them pretty much like Abe Lincoln, who, when asked early in his political campaign for president if he went to church, said he would if he could find one where people obeyed the laws of God. Mom wrote a piece along these lines.

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The Good Samaritan

*Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist*

I attended church service in Vestavia last Sunday. The minister, an energetic man with a ruddy complexion, gave a sermon about "The Good Samaritan"—about the responsibility of the more fortunate to help the less fortunate during the upcoming Christmas season. Well, I thought that was real nice because there were plenty of poor people in Birmingham who needed money just to pay rent and buy groceries, not to mention a Christmas present or two.

The minister's plan for helping the poor was to put on a big revival at the downtown YWCA, after which those in attendance would be fed, he said, "like Jesus fed the masses with just a few fishes and loaves of bread." Somehow, I didn't see the parallel between people who sought out Jesus' words

because they were starving spiritually and physically starving people who agreed in return for something to eat to hear what someone who never knew Jesus had to say about him.

Anyway, the more this minister talked, the more I wondered. The more I wondered, the more suspicious I became. I did not recall a single time that Jesus used bait to catch people. He never measured himself by the number of people he "saved" but was content to reach only those who were ready to be reached.

But by the time the church service ended, the congregation was all fired up to save all the poor and needy people in Birmingham by putting on the revival. As I walked up to the minister on the way out, I saw the kind of redness in his face that is not caused by spending a lot of time in nature. His extended, shaking right hand revealed the probable cause.

I leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Sir, I know some very needy people down at Brother Bryan's Mission, you know, that place downtown where the winos and other derelicts go for food and shelter. They sure could use some help down there!"

He jumped back, startled, turned even redder in the face and stammered, "Th-th-that's not a *ch-ch-church*-sponsored organization; we *o-o-only* give to the *p-p-poor* through church functions that might bring *s-s-souls* into the *K-K-Kingdom*."

A good Samaritan indeed!



Mom wrote yet another piece about ministers that probably drove quite a few of them nuts—or at the very least explained why the Vestavia minister drank so much. (In case you're wondering if my mother is going to keep popping into this story every time I need her, this is the last of her columns you will read in this book.)

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Satan Worshippers

*Rose Carruthers
Freelance Columnist*

Three Sundays ago, I visited another tiny kingdom church. The minister gave a sermon entitled "Satan in Our Midst." I do not know what prompted me to do it, but just as he began his sermon, I took out my notebook and drew a line down the middle, making two columns on the page. At the top of one column I wrote the word "God," and at the top of the other, "Satan." Each time the minister said "God" in his sermon, I made a mark in the God column, and each time he said Satan, I made a mark in the Satan column. By the end of the sermon, the score was Satan 23, God 6.

Such a lopsided score proved, as this minister had clearly set out to do, that Satan was definitely in our midst, at least in Mt. Brook. The next week I attended a West End church and heard nearly the identical sermon there. This time the score was Satan 29, God 7. And then just last Sunday, I attended church services in Norwood and the score there was Satan 38, God 9. I left that church feeling right poorly, for it seemed Satan was winning all over Birmingham, that in no place was God ahead.

At first, I could not fathom why those preachers seemed so fixated on Satan. Then a puzzling thought came into my mind: not once did any of them admit to themselves that they had any dealings with Satan—not once. There it was, plain as day if you knew how to read between the lines—the lopsided scores those ministers gave out on Sundays were the results of the Satan-vs.-God games in themselves!

That got me to thinking even more: I wondered what had possessed me, other than my need to gather information for this column, to ever subject myself to such a frightening experience?

And that made me ask myself why other people did that to themselves when they did not have to go to church, like I do, to make a living?

♦♦

With a religious upbringing like that from Mom, the thought of spending several years in seminary school did not bring joy to my heart. However, I knew that to preach in Alabama I would need credentials that at least gave lip-service to Christianity. After all, it was the fourth-ranking religion in the state, behind Football, Booze and Sex. Or maybe it was fifth, if you throw Money in there somewhere.

On the other hand, I couldn't stomach the thought of a fundamentalistic religious training. So I looked around for something more low key, something that wouldn't give me an ulcer or cancer, or get me lynched if I spoke out to avoid getting an ulcer or cancer.

The first school I interviewed was Trinity Seminary at Sweetwater University in Chattanooga. I hitchhiked up there one Thursday in early April for a Friday morning appointment with the dean, Dr. Daniel Russell, who was kind enough to arrange a dormitory room for my lodging. The wild dogwoods were in full bloom and the countryside was beautiful.

A trucker picked me up on U.S. 11, right in front of Andrew's Barbeque in Woodlawn where I had just wolfed down a couple of half-and-half sandwiches (half inside and half outside meat) and a half pint of cold buttermilk.

Square-jawed "Jack" said he was hauling a load of specialty steel parts from Birmingham up to Kingsport, Tennessee. His tattooed arms were about as big as my thighs. A serpented dagger on his right arm stretched long and thin every time a turn of the steering wheel made his muscles bulge.

Right off he started telling trucking stories, each laced with familiar subjects: football, fucking and drinking. As we drove into Ft. Payne, two hours north of Birmingham, he finally got around to asking me why I was going to Chattanooga. I told him I was checking out the seminary at Sweetwater University.

"Imagine that, me carrying on like this with a future preacher man!" he laughed, not really acting all that concerned about how he was carrying on.

I liked him.

"Don't worry about that," I said. "Better I think to have fun and be honest about yourself than to pretend to be something you ain't."

"I rightly agree with that!" he bellowed, slapping his right leg with the palm of his burly hand.

"Never was much for church myself, but I suppose it does some people good to go there," he continued.

"You have some beef with church?" I asked.

"Naw, not really. Just don't do nothing for me. No fun. Just a lot of rules and regulations. Hell, there's enough rules and regulations in life already. Shit, man, you can't imagine how many fuckin' forms I gotta fill out just to drive this rig that barely makes me and mine a living. Seems I spend more time keeping up with things than I do just doing them. I don't need to add any more of that to my life. Besides, I don't think the Lord meant it to be like those preachers say nohow."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"I mean, I don't think the Lord built this place for everybody to go around feeling bad about themselves, like they was evil or something. I know there's things you ain't supposed to do, but I figure as long as I do what I do without hurtin' nobody else, then the Lord won't get too mad at me. That's how I see it anyway."

"I think you see it pretty damn good."

"Well, if you ever gets yourself a church, then you be sure and let me know so I can come hear what you have to preach. For sure, you don't sound like no preacher man I ever met."

"I take that as a compliment, and if I ever do get a church, I might like for you to come do some preaching there yourself," I said.

At that moment, he exclaimed, "Sonofabitch, we gotta get off this here highway pronto!" He took the next side road and began looping back toward north.

When I asked why he'd done that, he said, "Just you wait and see!" We worked back over to U.S. 11, and as we crossed it and turned north again, he said, "Now look back down there a piece."

There, plain as day, were several highway patrol cars and a line of trucks pulled off the road.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Not sure. Maybe a speed trap, maybe looking for contraband."

"Contraband?"

"Yeah, you know, marijuana," he said, then broke into a big smile.

I knew better than to ask about that, but I couldn't help but ask how he knew the smokies were there.

"Can't rightly say, but it happens to me a lot. I'm driving down the highway, maybe too fast, maybe doing something else I shouldn't be doing, and all of a sudden I just know they are up the way, waiting on me. I ain't never been caught by them, never once, and I really can't explain it any better than that."

That was one of the strangest stories I had ever heard.

When we pulled into Chattanooga, he got out of the truck and came around to shake my hand. "Mighty good to have met you, preacher man," he said.

I took his huge paw firmly in both hands and held it. "Thanks," I said.

Tattooed on his left arm was a big heart with an arrow through it. He mounted his rig and belched a cloud of black diesel smoke. That was before everybody got worried about air pollution.



I reached the campus and found my way to the dorm. After storing my belongings in the room, I went out for supper at a nearby restaurant full of people about my age. I sat at the bar and ordered a beer and dinner.

At one table were several guys. Stacked on their table was a pyramid of "dead soldiers"—empty Budweiser and Pabst Blue Ribbon cans. They were arguing about whether or not Mary was a virgin when she died, so I figured they were seminary students.

By the time I finished dinner, the cigaret smoke was so thick in the place I could hardly breathe. So I left and walked around campus for a while before returning to my room to read some of *Atlas Shrugged*. I turned the lights out about eleven and slept soundly.

I met Dr. Russell at ten the next morning. A huge man with a ruddy complexion, he gave a warm handshake and invited me to sit in a comfortable chair next to his desk. I shared my interest in attending the seminary, how I had decided to do that instead of going to law school. His eyes brightened to hear that someone would forego a lucrative legal career for a modest life of the cloth.

"You grew up in the Episcopal church?" he asked.

"Well, no. Actually, I never went to church when I was growing up. Mom didn't think too much of churches—she thought that people in them didn't practice what they preached."

"Often the case," he said, "but I wonder if your mother threw the baby out with the bathwater?"

"I doubt that," I replied, "I think she did it to keep the baby—me—from being drowned in the bathwater. She viewed churches in the same way that she did cars in the street and electrical outlets—not safe for small children."

"That's a *c-c*-curious perspective you have there," he spluttered. "I wonder what we can offer you here? *W-we* certainly think *p-parents* should take their *ch-children* to *ch-ch-church* and *Su-su-sunday school*."

"I know you think that," I replied, "but as I look around at the people I know, most of whom were taken to church by their parents, I see a lot of pain, Dr. Russell—a lot of pain. You should see how much the kids at Alabama drink. You'd be appalled."

"But if you feel that way about churches, why do you want to go to seminary?" he asked, having regained his composure.

"Because I feel the call to help people, and I need credentials to do that. I believe I could do it as a lawyer to some extent or even as a psychologist or psychiatrist, but none of those professions deal with what I think is the root problem."

"And what do you think that is?"

"Alienation from God," I answered, hoping that was what he wanted to hear.

"So you do believe in God?" he asked, sounding greatly relieved.

"Certainly," I assured him.

"And in our lord and savior Jesus Christ?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That he was the Only Begotten Son of God, that he was born of the Virgin Mary, and allowed himself to be crucified to save us from our sins."

"I don't recall from my Bible reading that he ever said any of those things. But I do recall him saying that I

should worship God with all my being and love my neighbor as myself, and I try to do that, although sometimes not as well as I might."

"Well, your theology is not exactly in alignment with Episcopal theology," Dr. Russell warned.

"It's not in alignment with any Christian theology I know of," I replied.

"I'm not sure you would fit in here, my son," he said in a way that suggested he would pray for me later in the day.

"Dr. Russell, I need a divinity degree to do my work, which I think is also God's work," I countered.

"Well, here we do God's work through His Only Begotten Son, and you are not of the view that God even had an Only Begotten Son, are you? I suspect that you don't even believe in the virgin birth, do you?"

"Not really. I see that women are second-class citizens in Christianity. But Christians need a perfect woman somewhere in their lives—God knows their mothers weren't perfect—so they create a perfect mother like Mary to worship, and by golly, that must really put a strain on her soul, having to keep up that image for all the Christians. Besides, no perfect God would have seeded a plain, ordinary woman with His Only Begotten Son, now, would He?"

Dr. Russell looked like he might choke, or need a stiff belt of whiskey.

"Then I suggest that you apply to a *n*-nondenominational seminary, *l-l*-like the *U*-Unitarian seminary." He struggled to his feet to indicate our meeting was over.



I picked up a ride on the main drag through town—a young woman traveling over to Mounteagle, she said, to

visit her mother in a nursing home. She drove stiff-armed with a tight grip on the wheel like she really didn't want to be going anywhere.

She asked in a nervous voice what I was doing in Chattanooga and I explained my interest in the seminary.

"I wouldn't give two cents for all the ministers I know," she spat. When I didn't say anything, she continued. "All they do is tell people how bad they are, how the devil has them, that they are going to hell, that that's what happens to all people God doesn't like. I got so sick of hearing it in church that I quit going. And when I quit, all you-know-what broke loose. My mother never let me hear the end of it. Every time I see her at the nursing home, she asks if I went to church that week. It gets to me so bad I don't even want to see her, but I have to do it anyway."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because she's my mother!"

"Honor thy father and thy mother, right?" I suggested.

"Right, just like the Bible says to do."

"Sounds like you kind of wish there wasn't any Bible."

"Sometimes."

"Like on days like today that you visit your mother?"

"Yeah, especially then."

We rode in silence for a while.

"You married?" I asked.

"No, divorced."

"Children?"

"No, thank God."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't want a child to have to go through what I've been through."

"Why should it have to? You know better than to do all those things to a child."

"But, I can't stop other people from doing it!" she argued.

"You don't have to let people like that be around your children, do you?"

"I don't see as how there's anything I can do about it. Some things just can't be changed. What will be will be."

I let it go. As we drove in silence, I marveled at the fate of those who strayed from the herd, but I marveled even more at the fear the herd felt when one of its members wandered off. Such lost sheep were, no doubt, grist for Satan's mill. Yet, lost sheep as I was in the herd's eyes, I didn't find myself at all afraid of this Satan guy. Rather, I found myself afraid of the herd, about what it might try to do to me in "the land of the free and the home of the brave" for the way I thought and for what I said.

The wretched woman dropped me off on U.S. 11 south of Chattanooga at the turn-off to Mounteagle.

After about a half-hour, a Cadillac stopped and picked me up. The occupants were a man of about forty and his son, who looked to be about sixteen.

"Where you headed?" the man asked, as I jumped in the back seat.

"Tuscaloosa," I answered.

"Well, we're going to Birmingham and that's most of the way. You a student at Alabama?"

"Yes, sir, and thanks for the ride," I said cheerfully.

"I graduated there in '47, after the war. What you taking?"

"Psychology and English."

"What you plan to do with it when you get out?"

"I plan to go to seminary."

"You want to be a preacher?"

"I don't know yet. Right now, I just want to get the credentials," I said.

"My son here, he just had a pretty bad experience with some religious types at The Park School up in

Knoxville. He got kicked out and I'm taking him home. Boy, am I pissed. I sent him there because I heard it was a real good prep school, that it would prepare him to go to a good college so he could get ahead in life. After he got there, he learned it was run by a bunch of religious freaks—I mean, some real strange people."

"Those types exist, no doubt about that," I agreed.

The boy turned around and interjected, "Yeah, you wouldn't believe some of the things that happened."

"Try me," I offered.

"Well, I'll tell you something that just happened."

"O.K. I'm all ears," I said.

"You see, we had to take a course in Old and New Testament to graduate. I took New Testament the second semester of this year. The founder of the school, Dr. David Park who is over eighty, taught the class. Yesterday, he told us how horrible sex was—said it was sinful. One of the other boys in the class asked him, 'If sex is so bad, then how come there's so much talk about men knowing women in the Bible?'

"Dr. David glared at him and said, 'Sex is for having children. Otherwise, it is sinful. Let me tell you a story.'

"Then he told us about him and his wife having sex only three times in their sixty-year marriage. He said, 'Twice was to have children, once was for pleasure, and I have regretted that third time ever since.' He looked real pious after he said that.

"Then I don't know what happened to me. All of a sudden, out of my mouth popped, 'That's the stupidest thing I ever heard anybody say!'

"And that got you kicked out, right?" I asked.

"Right."

"Well, if I ever do get a church, I would be pleased to have you come and put me in my place if I ever say anything that stupid."



I did a lot of thinking over the next few days about the ministry. It didn't seem such a swell thing to get into, yet something in me said I should do it anyway. So the next week I hitchhiked to Nashville to interview Dean Daniel Mallory at the seminary at Franklin University. In his three-piece suit, he would have passed for a lawyer or businessman. This time, I kept my views to myself. "Be gentle as doves, cunning as serpents," Jesus had advised, and Dr. Mallory and I got on very well.

I explained that a religious awakening had caused me to give up my plans to go to law school and I intended to devote my life to relieving suffering and bringing peace to the world. He gave me an application that I filled out and left with him. The next week I sent up my Alabama transcript that showed my 3.90 grade average. I was notified in late June of my acceptance into that fall's class.

Accompanying the letter of acceptance was a note from Dean Mallory saying that he had secured me a proctorship in one of the underclass dorms and a partial scholarship that would pay half my tuition. I was mighty glad to learn that, because the cost of Franklin, a private school, was considerably more than the cost of going to Alabama.



Amazing Grace

Although I was decided within myself about attending seminary, Grandmother and Roland were not at all happy. As soon as I got home from Alabama in late May, they started in on me, both saying, "Riley, what do you think you're doing, boy, changing *our* plans like that?" They meant the plans I learned of in the letter from Dad.

What could I say? The very last thing I wanted was to let Dad down or upset Grandmother or Roland. Next to Mary Lou, they were the two dearest living people to me. Yet I knew in my heart that law school would be a big mistake for me, something I could never feel right about. I felt terrible.

I hadn't had the nerve to tell Mary Lou about Dad's letter, so I couldn't talk to her about what was eating at me, but she knew something was because I had off-and-on bouts of diarrhea and was pretty cranky. Whenever she tried to get it out of me, I clammed up. The more she pushed, the madder I got, then the madder she got.

This all came to a head one evening in early July as we were cooking dinner at Grandma's. I blew up, and then Mary Lou blew up. Our screaming at each other scared Grandma half to death and probably just about everybody else in Kundalina, too.

Finally, almost too hoarse to talk, I growled, "I'm going down to the drugstore and get me something to eat. See you later after I've cooled down."

"I hope you get yourself into a better mood!"

"Right," I retorted and stomped off.

Mr. Knight's drugstore still had an old-fashioned soda fountain. It was about to close when I got there, but the girl behind the counter made me up a strawberry ice cream soda, and I sat down on the wooden porch out front to eat it. When I was about halfway into the soda, Mrs. Murphy, my grade school librarian, pulled up to the curb in her car.

"Hi, Mrs. Murphy," I greeted her.

"Hi yourself, Riley," she replied through the car window. "Riley, how about you and me going somewhere private to talk about this lawyering business."

Oh shit! I thought to myself. I gulped the rest of the soda and climbed into the front seat beside her.

She drove to her home and we went inside. I had never been in her home before and was struck by the oriental decor—Chinese, I thought.

"It's Buddhist," she said, as if having read my mind.

"Buddhist?"

"Yes, Tibetan Buddhist. That thing on the wall beside the front window is a *tanka*, spelled t-a-n-k-a, a special sort of tapestry that can have rather remarkable effects on you if you look at it long enough."

I looked at the maroon-bordered *tanka*, about three feet across and four feet tall. In the center, sitting cross-legged with hands up-turned on his knees, was a large-bellied, blue oriental man with the most serene look on his face I had ever seen. To his right was a gold bell, and to his left a lightning bolt. Around the border were several other figures, some resembling the central figure, others of oriental women, winged-dragons and angel-like oriental people.

"Who's the big blue man?" I asked.

"The Buddha, the *Vajra Dhara* Buddha," she replied, spelling that, too.

Then she said, "The blue represents space, emptiness, a vacuum. The bell is the bell of truth, and the lightning rod represents clarity, clear perception, discernment and discrimination. Over there, that's a painting of my Buddhist teacher in my previous life."

An old man smiled at me. He was dressed in white, with coal-black, piercing-but-soft eyes and a white mustache that curled down each side of his mouth to join a long white goatee. He held his right hand up in farewell salutation; his left hand was folded over his heart.

"Your previous life?" I asked, surprised.

"That's right."

"How do you know?"

"Riley, someday I may explain these matters to you, and then someday you might tell me about your visit to Third Wing North."

My jaw dropped. I decided to lay low, real low. She continued.

"Your going to law school was the others' idea, not mine. We don't always see eye to eye on things. Certainly, we didn't in Tibet. I told them then the Buddhists were in for a rude awakening. Goodness, right there at the end of The Tibetan Book of the Dead it says to pray that the next time you come back you are not a woman! Can you imagine them saying that? Rejecting the value of half the population? Well, the Tibetan Buddhists paid dearly when the Chinese came in and took Tibet away from them."

I shrugged, indicating I didn't understand.

"Riley, you learned about the *feminine* in college. Well, Tibet was the Tibetans' piece of Mother Earth; it represented their feminine. It was taken away from them to show them on a soul level what they had done in rejecting the feminine—outside themselves and within."

I just sat there, looking pretty stupid, I suppose, because I sure felt that way.

"There's a lot more to this. The sex war raged on Ramira for eons."

"And where in God's name is Ramira?" I asked, totally confused.

"In the Pleiades."

Oh Jesus, I thought.

"A very long time ago, some Pleiadeans decided to go on a big adventure and came to Earth. They brought with them a lot of experimental ideas that they should have left at home. Native Earthlings were pretty backward, but sexually they were relatively healthy. My ancestors changed all of that, and the problems they created here are coming home to roost. Now we have to clean up their mess if we want to survive as a race. But right now you are all torn up inside about what you should do, right?"

"Right," I answered, remembering the diarrhea.

"Well, you need to pay very close attention to what your gut is telling you. The worst thing you could do would be to go against yourself, to try to do something you don't feel like doing."

"But what about Earth? What about the rest of space? What will happen if I don't do my part?"

"It's impossible not to do your part if you do what your gut tells you to do."

"But this game plan comes from pretty high up, doesn't it?" I countered.

"Yes, it does, but it doesn't come from God, dear boy. If it did, then you would know it and you wouldn't question for a second being a lawyer. You would just do it."

"And are Roland, Grandma and you doing what feels right to you? How about my parents—were they puppets on somebody else's string?"

"No, not at all. There was no coercion. We all volunteered for this mission. And we chose Kundalina because it is near the largest town in Alabama, 'the Heart of Dixie,' the center of the old Confederacy, the KKK,

racism, chauvinism, macho thinking and just about every other form of male stupidity.

"If we can change Alabama, then the impact on the rest of a country that views Alabama as just about the worst possible place on Earth to live will be enormous. But as often happens where there's free will, the future cannot be predicted. In this case, things just didn't turn out as we had hoped, so we had to make adjustments in our plans. We would like for you to help us, but you have to decide."

"I'm confused," I said. "Ever since reading Dad's letter, I've been under the impression that I was part of the mission from the beginning, that I had no choice."

"You did choose to be on the mission, but that does not mean you have to stay on it. You always have a choice, my dear boy—always. Your father naturally adopted the fatherly tendency to clone his son, and your dear mother went along with what your father wanted for you."

Her stare pierced my soul. I ducked her gaze by turning to the *tanka*, wondering what it really was, who she really was—hell, who I really was. But one thing I didn't wonder was whether or not I would go to the seminary.

I stood up to leave. "Thank you. You've helped me a great deal. I hope I can repay the favor some day," I said.

"Perhaps you will," she said softly.



Breaking Free

I felt much better when I got back to Grandma's, and I was glad Mary Lou was still there. Of course, I didn't tell her a word about Mrs. Murphy.

I lit a candle in the bedroom and turned out the lights. We undressed and flopped on the bed. I ran my fingers through Mary Lou's hair as she lightly stroked my chest.

As I relaxed, I became aware of two people looking down at me out of what looked like the window of the control room of a spaceship. One was a bearded man I did not recognize, the other a willowy, ghost-like woman, not exactly human-looking but with vaguely eerie humanoid features.

"Do you see that?" I asked Mary Lou.

"See what?" she asked.

I explained what I saw, and as I did, the woman-like being reached into her solar plexus and pulled from it a silver object just like the infinity medallion I had taken to the vault. She pushed it toward us and it floated our way, right into my solar plexus. When it went in, I breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"My God, I feel like a part of me that was lost was just returned to me!" I exclaimed.

Then the bearded man said to me, "You and I are brothers. One of us had to stay with the ship while the other came to Earth to carry out our mission. I'm always

here, waiting on you to complete the mission so we can go home."

"Do you hear any of this?" I asked Mary Lou.

"Hear what?" she asked back.

"Damn, there's a man in a spaceship up there talking to me. Can't you hear?"

"Nope, all I hear is you," she replied, agitated.

"Look here, whoever you are, what's this about a mission?" I demanded.

Then the man said, "This is an intergalactic priestess who caters to all sentient beings in this universe. Her purpose here is to catalyze what was initially awakened in you when you read your father's letter."

Mary Lou gasped. She had heard. "What the hell's going on? Who are you? Who are they? What's this all about?!!!"

The bearded man spoke again.

"Mary Lou, this cannot all be explained at this time. Certain things Riley needs to know are now revealed to him either directly or by being planted deep in his unconscious mind. Also, a template he has stored in a safe place can reveal more when he meets the person who can decipher it, as can the writings of Riley's mother under her pen name, Rose Carruthers. Be wary of what either of you say about any of this to other people. Riley knows a few people who can be trusted and there are others. However, they will not be revealed unless he needs their help."

Mary Lou looked at me, mouth agape, eyes like saucers.

So I finally told her about the old manila envelope Mom had given me on her last day. I recited the contents of Daddy's letter and described the silver medallion and the flat gold plate with the hieroglyphics. She looked at me, shaking.

"Remember that wild and wonderful thing that happened between us in Mom's bed the night we ate that

big hen yellowbelly?" I asked. Mary Lou tried to speak, couldn't, then just nodded. "I think that was a part of this, too," I said.

I looked at the bearded man, and he nodded. Then the image disappeared and Mary Lou and I almost immediately fell asleep in each other's arms. Upset as she was and as excited as I was, they must have done something to knock us out.

In the middle of the night, the electric ants returned, gnawing into the left side of my brain. I awoke and the ants were still there. "Go away. Leave me alone!"

"Who are you talking to now?" Mary Lou demanded, angry.

"Oh, just some old friends that come around every now and then to give me a hard time."

"Riley, I don't like what's going on with you. It's weird—and it frightens me!"

"I know, Mary Lou. It seems weird to me, too, but I don't know what I can do about it."

"I think I need some time to think. Gosh, I've loved you since we were kids, but I didn't know about this. I just want to finish school, buy some land in the country and animals to raise, be a veterinarian, be your wife, and someday have a couple of kids. That's what you said you wanted, too. Now all this other stuff is happening. This isn't easy for me, Riley, not easy at all."

"It's not easy for me, either, but it's damned exciting, you have to admit that!"

"Yes, it's exciting, but it's not the kind of excitement I need to be happy. Do you understand, Riley? I don't think I want to get involved in any of this. If you think you have to do it, then perhaps we aren't suited for each other. This isn't a criticism; it's about what's right for me. You need to give this some thought—in fact, a lot of thought."

We lay awake for a long time without speaking. She vibrated like a charged generator. Mom hadn't prepared

me for this. Nobody had prepared me for it. It just didn't seem fair. We hardly spoke a word the next morning over breakfast.



I was in a blue funk and decided to go fishing that afternoon at Lake Purdy if I could borrow a car. I called Roland at the Boys' Ranch. Although he wasn't happy about my decision to go to the seminary, he offered me his pickup and five-horse Johnson outboard motor. I trotted over to his house, got the motor out of his garage, and took his spare truck key that he kept wired underneath the chassis.

I rented a wooden boat at the Lake Purdy landing and ran way up the Cahaba River tributary that feeds into the lake from the east. By late afternoon, I was having pretty good luck with bass, fishing with black plastic jelly worms on weighted weedless hooks. I had six on the stringer that averaged better than two pounds—the largest probably three and a half pounds.

Catching bass this way almost requires a sixth sense, because you need to set the hook just as soon as the bass inhales the bait. Usually you don't feel the strike, or a tap-tap-tap, unless the fish is small. The keepers—especially the big ones—gently take the bait, and sometimes the only way you know is because the line feels lighter or the jig doesn't fall after you raise it. And sometimes, there's no indication at all.

Roland had taught me, but it took me about two years of steady fishing to really get the hang of it. It was frustrating at first, watching Roland suddenly rear back, set the hook and haul in a keeper, while I just sat there, only catching yearling bass that didn't know better than to pound the bait and let me know they were there. But over

time I got the hang of it, and even today I really can't explain how I know the bass is there, bait in its mouth. I just know.

Anyway, just before it got too dark to see, when the fish usually feed best, I hooked a really big fish. It didn't come to the top like a bass, so I figured it was a big yellow catfish or maybe even a drum. It dragged the boat out into the middle of the slough and upstream. I fought it to a standstill, under the boat in about ten feet of water. But I couldn't raise it off the bottom.

After about five minutes of this stalemate, the fish suddenly started up. I cranked my line in fast to keep it tight. The line was angled under the boat and I realized that the fish, whatever it was, was charging the bottom of the boat. I braced and just as I figured the fish would hit the hull, the entire boat, with me in it, was lifted out of the water, straight up into a flying saucer about a hundred yards up. No shit!

The bearded man and the priestess waited inside.

"Welcome, Zxypl!" they greeted me.

I pissed and shit all over myself right then and there. But before I could say anything, my bodily discharges disappeared.

"A-and wh-what do you want now?" I asked, slowly regaining my composure.

"We have come to help you," the bearded man replied.

"Why do I need your help?" I asked.

"For your mission."

I felt my belly tighten, like something sinister, or even evil, was about to happen. Yet I said nothing.

"Unless we have your help, a calamity may occur in this universe, a calamity that may even destroy certain parts of it."

"Yeah, I know all about that, but I don't think it's my job to fix what I didn't break," I countered, wondering if those would be my very last words as a human being.

The man looked hard at me but said nothing. Then he stepped aside and from around the corner came Dad—or what looked like Dad. I nearly fainted. I rushed to greet him but he held out his hands, warning me to stop.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded.

"We need your help, son."

"In the first place, I'm not sure I'm your son, at least not in the complete sense of the word. And in the second place, I don't think I want to stay on the mission."

He stared at me but said nothing. I stared back. I felt a shaking deep inside. It reminded me of what I felt when I first read Dad's letter, except this time it came from something strong in me. It felt good.

"You have something we need if you are not going to use it," Dad finally said.

I knew it was finished, that I had won.

"What is it?" I asked, hoping to end the meeting as quickly as possible.

"The silver medallion and the template with the hieroglyphics. We need to give them to someone who will use them," Dad said.

"No problem. I'll retrieve them tomorrow. Can I give them to Roland?"

"Fine," he nodded.

We stood looking at each other. I started to cry, then I really let go. I knew I would never see him again. He showed no emotion, none whatsoever. It was eerie. Perhaps it was not easy for Pleiadeans to show emotion. Who knows? Maybe they didn't even have emotions.

The next I knew, I was back on Lake Purdy in my boat, about two hundred yards out from the boat landing. I cranked the motor and took the boat to shore, unloaded and drove home. I didn't say a word to Mary Lou about

what happened. The next day I went to City Federal, retrieved the medallion and template, and delivered them to Roland. He looked sad. I figured there wasn't anything to say, so I just gave him a big hug and left.

That night I told the rest of the story to Mary Lou. It took a long time to tell because I cried a lot. When I finished, Mary Lou said she really was glad that I had decided not to continue the mission. We made love and went to sleep.

In the early morning, I dreamed the spaceship was coming for me. As it descended, I heard Dad say, "Son, we just cannot let you get away. We need you for our mission." I felt the electric ants boring deep into the left side of my brain. Then I heard another voice, a strong voice the likes of which I had never before heard say: *"Enough of this!"* Mrs. Murphy flashed across my line of vision toward the spaceship, followed by a blinding flash of light. The spaceship disappeared.

I awoke. Grandma was shrieking in her bedroom.

"Mary Lou, something real strange just happened." I said.

"You're telling me!" she exclaimed. "Jesus. I just dreamed Mrs. Murphy got blown to bits!"

"I'll tell you about it later, but right now, please see what's bugging Grandma."

Mary Lou got out of bed and left our room. In a few minutes, she returned to say Grandma had a bad dream. I told Mary Lou what had happened and what I thought it meant—that I was released from being a Pleiadian. Then we went back to sleep.

I dreamed again. I was in a jail cell. Mrs. Murphy came and opened it, freeing me. I awoke and again Grandma was screaming.

I dragged myself out of bed to tend to Grandma. Then I told Mary Lou about the dream and about my talk with Mrs. Murphy. We went back to sleep and I had

another dream in which Mrs. Murphy held a big Valentine heart toward me, saying nothing. Just smiling.

Roland called the next morning as Mary Lou and I were eating breakfast. His voice was shaky. Mrs. Murphy had died in her sleep and he was pretty sure Grandma had died, too. I ran into Grandma's room and found her lifeless body. Mary Lou was a mess.



The night after Grandma's funeral, I was still pretty dizzy about all that had happened. So I went out into the garden beside Grandma's house and sat down, right in the middle of it next to a big yellow crooknecked-squash plant.

I said out loud to whomever or whatever might be listening, "Please help me see the way; I feel mighty alone and lost. I want to do the right thing. I want to do Your will."

In a few minutes, a deep sense of calm came over me, as if I had been tranquilized except my mind was fully alert. I got up and went back into the house. Mary Lou was already asleep when I eased into bed beside her. I slept soundly and dreamed that I was held in a huge pair of arms that gently rocked me.



The Send-Off

Summer was ending. Mary Lou and I would see each other less when fall came because Nashville was nearly two hundred miles farther from Auburn than Tuscaloosa. We were sad about that, but we were alarmed about the escalating Vietnam War—about my being drafted.

That was when we decided to marry. We figured married men would be even safer from the draft than students, so we went to the downtown Birmingham courthouse and got hitched by a judge. We didn't tell anybody, not even Mary Lou's parents. But I did drop off a copy of our marriage license with the draft board out on First Avenue North in the East Lake section of Birmingham.

A few days later when I went by Roland's to say goodbye, I got a surprise. The first thing he said was, "I'm glad you and Mary Lou got married. It will protect you for awhile, but eventually you will be in this war unless you have a child. The Korean war was probably the last war on foreign soil for which our government would draft fathers. Now there's too much public opinion against drafting them for wars that do not threaten our country's shores."

I pondered this quietly.

Roland looked like he wanted to say more. I kept still and he continued. "You need to know that the physical existence of the Pleiades—or even Earth, for that matter—is irrelevant in the big scheme of things. Souls do not die when places die, and if souls need new places to evolve,

God will provide those places. So while some of the others would not like me telling you this, you are entitled to know so that you can make an intelligent decision about how to live your life."

"Thank you, Roland, I'll never forget that," I said, tears streaming down my face.

We stood and embraced.



I later shared with Mary Lou what Roland had said. She took my hand, smiled and said, "Riley, I'm not really interested in all that, but if knowing it helps you be free, then I'm happy for that."

"There's one other thing Roland said."

"Which is?"

"He said we need to have a child to keep me out of the war."

Mary Lou blanched, scrunched her face, then said, "Not a chance. I'm not ready to give up my studies or my work with animals to have a child. Not yet, anyway."

"Let's not worry about that now. I think we have some time to decide. Besides, I'm not ready either," I retreated.



The Steeple Chase

The seminary was like attending class in a mortuary. However, a lively debate raged on the campus-at-large about Vietnam. As with most wars, there was very little middle ground: you were either a dove or a hawk. In late January of my second semester, I rented a typewriter, typed a letter about the war, and mailed it to *The Trailblazer*, the student newspaper. To my utter amazement, the letter was published unedited.

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Dear Trailblazer:

I am currently enrolled in Franklin Seminary, or perhaps a better word would be "cemetary," because that's what it feels like to me. I think it feels that way for the same reason that we are now embroiled in the Vietnam "conflict," and I will explore that connection in this letter.

This skirmish that President Johnson refuses to call a war is necessary, he says, to save a small democratic country, and thus the world, from creeping communism. But are we really out to save the world from communism by fighting over a country half the size of Tennessee, when we didn't lift a finger to defend Eastern Europe, the Soviets and the Chinese from communism? Or is there another reason?

As I recall from my college history courses, the bone the Japanese had to pick with us was the Indonesian oil fields that we threatened to cut them off from, thus destroying their economy. Oil was also our government's real motive for getting us into the Korean war, and it is why we are now in Vietnam.

Oil will continue to get us into wars until we learn to live on less of Mother Earth's energy and learn instead to live on the same energy that fed Jesus Christ—the Holy Spirit! That's right, the real problem has nothing to do with democracy or communism—or with oil for that matter. The real problem has to do with consuming lowest fuel—and not just oil, either. Other forms of low test fuel consumed in copious quantities are booze, marijuana, LSD, money, and casual sex.

So how does one go about consuming divine fuel—the Holy Spirit? Although this may not go down well in certain circles, the *only* way to receive the Holy Spirit is to become open, receptive, submissive—in other words, more feminine. Indeed, we come into this life through a flesh and blood woman, and it is through the spiritual feminine that we return to God.

That's what the passage in Psalm 23 is about: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The valley is certainly a feminine symbol, and in that valley one dies, one submits; and after doing that, one receives the rod and staff of God—the Holy Spirit.

If you are of the religious view that women are the cause of all of humanity's problems, just take a step back and look around. Do you see any women voting to fund this *fuelish* war in Vietnam? Do you see any women military personnel fighting it? Do you see women running oil, petrochemical, vehicle, or arms manufacturing companies, all of which stand to profit enormously from this war? No, of course not!

Although women have shut themselves off to a large degree from the Holy Spirit by buying into the notion that

the only way to God is through Adam (as per Genesis), women by their very female nature are naturally more open to the Holy Spirit than are most men. This is evidenced by the fact that women simply do not thirst for battle, oil, money and power to anywhere near the degree that most men do.

So, unless our nation takes a radical turn away from the male polarity in which it is now siezed, unless it opens itself to the high-octane fuel of the Holy Spirit, it will not be long before we have another oil war, and another. And before long we will be ruled by oil, even worship it. Our country will be as spiritually dead as Franklin Seminary, and women will not have had a thing to do with us getting ourselves stuck in that ugly tar-baby.

Jake Carruthers

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A bona fide ruckus ensued. Dean Mallory personally visited every classroom and asked the author to come forward either publicly or privately and be identified. Naturally, I couldn't bring myself to do that. After a week passed and nobody had confessed, he made every student sign an affidavit saying he or she (there were two women in the program at the time) did not write the letter. Again, taking Jesus' advice about being cunning as a serpent, I signed the affidavit.

The undergraduate students under my care in Carey Hall, a mix of sophomore and junior young men, knew I was a seminary student and wanted to know what I thought about the letter. I told them parts of it were ridiculous, but that I thought there was a lot of truth in the idea of the Holy Spirit being high-octane fuel.

Feeling sexually starved, as did most young men their age, they wanted to know how the Holy Spirit could

fill them up. That was my opening. So I invited them down to the lounge where there was room for everyone to sit and talk informally. When we were comfortably seated, I asked if any one of them was sexually fulfilled?

Not one raised his hand, so I said, "I suppose some of you have had sex with a girl whereas others of you have not. No matter. Apparently none of you are sexually satisfied. So I ask you how many times will you have to have sex with a woman—indeed, how many women will you have to have sex with—to be satisfied?"

Again, no visible answer.

"Will fifty times do it? One hundred times? One thousand? Five women? Ten? Twenty? Fifty? One hundred? One thousand? Come on, how many?"

Still no answer.

"It seems that no amount of fucking will satisfy you, then, is that right?"

Nervous laughter, to hear a preacher-to-be use the "F" word.

"What do you think it is that women represent? I mean, what do they symbolize in a spiritual sense? Think in terms of 'As above so below.' What 'above' do women here below represent?" I asked.

Again no answer. Lots of blank looks.

"Let's try something," I suggested. "Anyone not willing to try an exercise as long as they don't have to share how it affects them?"

Nobody said anything, so I said, "In that case, why don't you all just get as comfortable as you can in your seats and close your eyes. Take a few seconds and then I'll proceed."

They shifted around, some kicking off their shoes and crossing their legs, others slouching back in their seats, yet others sitting erect with hands in their laps or on their knees.

"Okay, here goes," I said. "I will say something and for the next couple of minutes allow yourself to notice anything that comes to you or that happens inside of you. Try to be receptive to whatever might happen, and during this exercise please do not talk."

I waited about five seconds and then said, "Holy Spirit, let these young men feel your presence in whatever way they can best know it." Then I was quiet.

After a while I asked them to come back to their normal state of awareness.

"Anybody notice anything? You don't have to say what it is, but if something did happen and you just want to indicate it, simply raise your hand or nod your head," I suggested.

Several boys indicated that something indeed had happened. I said nothing. Then one said, "I felt very light, as if I was floating." Another said, "I felt for a moment like I would cry." Another boy said, "I felt like I was being held," and yet another said, "I felt really happy there for about fifteen seconds." There were those who said they didn't feel a thing, and a few said nothing.

Still they wanted an explanation about the Holy Spirit, something they could turn over in their minds.

"That's difficult to explain. It's sort of like trying to understand women who often seem to act irrationally for reasons that make no sense to you. You've all had that experience with women, haven't you?"

Smiles and nods.

"You see, the Holy Spirit doesn't work in the mental realm. It is not linear, not subject to reason. You know it like you know what it's like to laugh, to cry, to be angry. Once you laugh, you know laughter. Before that, you cannot imagine laughter, nor can anybody explain it to you. Am I making any sense?"

One of them said, "Well, everybody has laughed in their life, so I'm not sure that's a good analogy."

"Well, have you ever had sex with a woman?"

He flushed.

"Until you do, you can't know what that's like. It's impossible for you to know. And afterwards, you know. Well, getting to know the Holy Spirit is sort of like having sex for the first time, only a heck of a lot better."

"I think the best way is to ask it into your life the way we just did in that exercise. Some of you felt it and others perhaps didn't. I wouldn't be concerned about not having felt it; nor would I get too proud if you did feel it, like you just got laid for the first time and are now better than your virgin friends!"

Several of them laughed.

"Remain humble and open, inviting the Holy Spirit into your life, and it will come in its own way, at its own pace. This may not be in the way you might envision or want, but it will be in a way that is appropriate for you.

"My hunch is that the more you experience the Holy Spirit, then the more you will really feel like men and the more interested you will be in living a peaceful, enjoyable life with a mature woman, an equal partner, instead of having a string of young girls, fast cars, booze, drugs, a winning football team, a fat bank account, or whatever you use to try to fill yourselves up. That's my thinking on this, and I offer it for what it's worth. If you can use it, do so. If not, then let it go."

That was one puzzled-looking bunch of young men I left sitting in the lounge. But somebody there must have liked it because about a week later Dean Mallory called me into his office to say how much he liked the way I had handled the matter about that "totally outlandish letter"—and how well I had turned it into a spiritual awakening for several young men.

"I think you should think about doing a campus ministry internship in your third year," he suggested.

"Thanks, but it seems I'm already doing that now and for my last year I might want to intern in a church so I can have a broader experience and thus a better understanding of my options after graduation."

We left it there, and I went about my studies in a way that never once aroused any suspicion. I took prolific notes and spoke only when spoken to, never offering my true views in class, saying only enough to satisfy my professors' curiosity about my intellectual grasp of the material, which was more fully answered by the 4.0 average I carried into my second year. Dean Mallory viewed me as a rising star, gave me a full scholarship for the next year, and arranged a paid position in the campus counseling service in addition to my proctorship in Carey Hall.



Defrocked

I spent the next summer in Kundalina doing odd repair jobs and loving on Mary Lou. She had done well her first year at vet school and was looking forward to the next year's work. She landed an internship with Cahaba Heights Veterinary Clinic and was happy as could be. Cahaba Heights was the old New Merkle community. The name was changed to make it easier for land developers and real estate agents to sell properties there.

I wasn't particularly excited about my second year in the seminary, but I was pleased with the prospect of being a student counselor. I didn't know it was that very position that would right away change my career plans.

The first person assigned to me for counseling that fall was a perky blond liberal arts student who introduced herself as "Debbie." She was obviously distraught, and I asked what was bothering her.

"I'm *p-p*-pregnant," she gasped, bursting into tears.

I handed her a box of Kleenex and waited, not having a clue what to do next.

"My whole life's ruined! My mother will kill me. My daddy will disown me. He's always said I would end up pregnant and now I've gone and done it," she gushed through a gallon of tears.

"Feels hopeless?"

"Yes," she wimpered.

"Debbie, do you mind telling me about your family's religious background?"

"Why?"

"I don't know, but somehow I think it's important."

"Well, we're Catholic."

"So are you prepared to raise this child?"

"I suppose. Don't see that I have any choice," she pouted.

"Well, you could give it up for adoption."

"I could never do that!"

"Are you going to marry the father?"

"I'm not sure. He doesn't even want me to have the baby. Said I should have an abortion but I can never do that, never!"

"Because you're Catholic?"

"That, and also because of my parents. They would never agree to it. Besides, abortions are illegal."

"Why do your parents have to know about it?"

"I tell them everything; they're my parents."

"Debbie, this may not make you happy, but it looks to me that your real problem is not that you're pregnant out of wedlock."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your real problem is being ruled by your parents and your religion. That, I think, dwarfs your being pregnant."

"That has nothing to do with my being pregnant!"

"I think it does, and if you are willing to explore this, I think I can show you the connection."

"Go ahead, show me!" she dared.

"All right. I'll say something and you just notice what happens for you when you hear it, okay?"

"Well, okay."

"Notice what you experience when you hear me say," then I paused a few seconds before saying in a neutral voice, ". . . 'Debbie, you are not a whore.'"

Her lips trembled, then she grimaced, but she could not hold back the tears of a lifetime of being called a tramp

by her father and church—an unfortunate self-fulfilling prophecy.

After she recovered, I suggested that she have a rather frank talk with her parents about her situation. I wasn't sure what the best solution was, but I was convinced that she needed to face the dragon standing dead in her path and let the chips fall where they would.

"What can I say to my dad?" she asked, sounding like a very young child.

"Something like, 'Dad, I love you but I cannot let you call me a tramp anymore. I'm just a human being, I'm not perfect. I'm not the Virgin Mary. I need your love, not to be on a pedestal. I've had all that I can stand from you, and if you judge me now for not living up to your expectations of me, then we will just have to take an indefinite vacation from each other until something shifts.'"

Her eyes widened and she pushed back in her chair, a look of stark terror on her face.

"I-I could *n*-never do *th*-that!" she rattled.

"Why not?" I asked.

"*B-b*-because *th*-then he would take it all *ou*-out on *m*-my poor *m-m*-mother!"

"Well, you seem to have a choice here," I continued. "Either keep playing the tramp role with your father, which I imagine is pretty much how he treats your mother, too—and probably his own mother if she's still alive—or stop this pattern in your family by standing up to him."

"He would *q*-quit paying my *t-t*-tuition, and I'd *h*-have to go *h*-home and *l-l*-live with *H-H-HIM!*" she begged.

"Debbie, you will be able to think up a good counter to every suggestion I make, so let's end our meeting. I've done all I can for now. If you need behind-the-scenes support to have that talk with your parents, then I'm available. But the decision has to come from you, and you

will have to do the talking. I can't do it for you. Nobody can do it for you. Nobody."

Clearly she wanted something else from me but what could I do? I didn't know anything else to do, so I ushered her out of the counseling room.

The next morning I was summoned to Dean Mallory's office and asked to explain my *unorthodox* methods of counseling.

"What do you mean by 'unorthodox'?" I asked. "I showed her how to walk in the valley of the shadow of death, where she would find God's rod and staff to comfort her. Isn't that what Christian counselors are supposed to do? Teach people how to face what frightens them and trust God to see that things turn out okay?"

"Well, we view counseling more within the pastoral setting, one of giving support and comfort," Dean Mallory replied.

"If she had asked for that, then perhaps I would have given it to her. But what she presented was a deep spiritual wound caused by her own father and religious upbringing. She had adopted the belief that she was a whore, and she acted out that belief in her life. Heck, Dean Mallory, how would you feel if your father called you a sissy all your life?"

He swallowed hard and gave me an odd look before saying in a stern voice, "Mr. Strange, we cannot afford for the parents of Franklin University students to be unhappy with the advice we give their children in our student counseling program."

"Why not? They want healthy children, don't they?"

"Again, hear what I say," he said, placing both palms down on his desk and leaning toward me. "We cannot afford for our parents to be unhappy with what we tell their children!"

I noticed the emphasis on "afford," as in "money."

"Well, then I guess I cannot afford to do any more counseling for the student counseling service. I'm not a whore, either, Dean Mallory," I said, standing to leave.

"Now wait just a minute! We're not finished talking," he interjected.

"Well, what else do you have to say?"

"That this incident and your response to it causes me deep concern for you, for whether or not you are suited for the ministry."

"Aw, come on. Didn't Jesus tell people to cut the knot with their parents?"

His eyes narrowed to almost a squint.

"What's that got to do with this situation?!!" he demanded, looking rattled.

"Plenty. It's about psychological separation; it's about growing up, about clearing out your parents' influence to make space in yourself for God. Isn't that what ministers are supposed to teach—how to be in a relationship with God? How can they do that if they still worship false gods like their parents? When they buy into false religious teachings that women are evil?"

"Th-that is not our way," he sputtered. "Y-you should have t-talked to her about f-forgiving her f-father, if indeed her f-father was as abusive as you seem to think."

"Well, as I see it, to be able to forgive someone you must first be able to forgive yourself. That girl hates herself for being her father's whore. I tried to help her be herself instead. If she can do that, then perhaps she will like herself enough to be able to forgive her father. For sure, she can't do it now because she hates herself."

"I repeat, th-that's n-n-not our w-w-way!" Dean Mallory rasped, looking exasperated.

"It was Jesus' way. He was always telling people to leave their parents and follow him, to let the dead bury the dead. He also told them that no man could serve two

masters, that they had to choose between serving God and mammon."

He flinched, turned red-faced, and glared angrily. I excused myself and left.

Two days later I found a letter from him in my student mailbox saying, "Your theological views are incompatible with those of Franklin Seminary. Accordingly, you have been placed on disciplinary probation, to be reviewed by the Board of Regents in January."

I called Mary Lou that night and told her what had happened. I said I was quitting school.



Looking back, I see that I really didn't belong in the seminary. If I had graduated and then gone around speaking my mind to my congregation, before long somebody would have written Franklin to complain. Then Franklin would have turned around and written me a letter saying I had misrepresented myself, that I was a fraud. They would want me to return my diploma, saying they were prepared to take legal action if I didn't. There I'd be, having spent three years in the seminary with nothing to show for it—a defrocked "doubting Thomas."



The Plains

I arrived in "the Plains" about six o'clock the next evening. Except for my fishing tackle, camping equipment and tools that the new owners allowed me to store in Grandma's garage in Kundalina, and \$30,000 from the sale of Mom's and Grandma's homes in my savings account at City Federal, everything I owned was in the two canvas army duffel bags I brought with me.

Mary Lou rode her bicycle over to the Texaco station on Main Street where my ride let me off. I yanked her off before she completely stopped and squeezed her tight. She smelled wonderful. She lived in one of the women's dorms where men were not allowed, so she walked me to the home of one of her professors, Dr. Fred Tate, who had agreed to put me up until I got situated.

The next morning I started looking for a place for us to live. The newspaper listed few apartments for rent because most of them were already rented out to students. However, some houses were available, and one ad especially caught my eye:

Close to town. Frame farm house, barn in need of repair, ten acres, mostly fenced, fishing pond, shade trees, garden. \$100 per month for someone willing to fix it up. Call Zeke Brown. 555-7821.

I called Mr. Brown and he met me at the Texaco. Zeke was the perfect name for this grizzled, tobacco-

chewing good-old-boy who said he had played defensive tackle for Auburn in the late '30s and later served in the Marines and fought the Japanese all over the South Pacific. He asked where I was from and about my parents. I think he took a strong liking to me after he learned what happened to Dad.

The place definitely needed repairs. The house and barn had holes in the roofs, with birds and squirrels in residence under the rafters. Several windows in the house were broken out, the front porch sloped hard right, and the front steps were rotting out. The house needed scraping and painting and the fence was down in several places. The place was about a ten-minute bicycle ride from downtown and would do just fine.

"Mr. Brown," I said, "I can fix this place up myself but I don't have money for the materials, nor do I have a truck to haul them out here. I have the tools I need back in Birmingham, but I need help with materials and getting them and my tools here. Can you swing that if I do the rest?"

"Maybe. What do you have in mind?" he asked.

"To start with, that roof and the decking need to be replaced. The broken windows need fixing, the front porch needs to be jacked up and new supports put in, and the steps need to be replaced. This I can get done before winter sets in. The rest will have to wait until next spring or summer."

"You got a paying job?"

"Not yet. Just got here yesterday."

"What brought you here?"

"My girlfriend. She's in vet school. That's why I like this place of yours. We can keep some animals out here for her to practice on."

"What about the army? They're liable to draft you and then where would I be?"

I didn't know how to answer other than to tell him that Mary Lou and I were married, had been for over a year, and that the army wasn't drafting married men. I said her parents didn't know about our being married yet and that was why I called her my girlfriend. I offered to show him our marriage license but he shook his head and asked, "Well, where will you get money to pay the rent?"

"I'll get a job, don't worry about that. I can do repair and building work. I did maintenance work on apartments in Tuscaloosa when I was in college. I can give you references."

I didn't say anything about the money at City Federal.

"Well, I don't know if I can count on you, not knowing you and all that," he said, still testing me like he should do with somebody he didn't know from anybody to whom he was about to entrust something valuable.

"Look, it's true you don't know me, but I don't know you, either. Yet I'm willing to fix up your place for you, and in return, I'm going to ask you to give me an option to buy it someday for a price to be determined now, if we strike a deal. That should prove my sincerity. Besides, from the looks of this place, you haven't had anybody living here for quite a while. I don't see what you've got to lose."

"Well, let me think about it and I'll get back with you tomorrow."



The next morning, Zeke, as he asked me to call him, ferried me over to his lawyer's office. The lawyer drew up a lease-purchase agreement that gave me the right to buy the place for \$17,000 at any time within the next three years. I paid the first month's rent in cash, and that

afternoon Zeke's son, Donnie, drove me in their pickup truck to Kundalina to get my stuff.

The next day I went to a second-hand store and bought two stand-up lamps, a rocking chair, a Frigidaire and a double bed and mattress, all of which Donnie hauled to the house in the pickup. I figured my Coleman camp stove would get me by until Mary Lou moved in and we needed a regular stove. I ordered building materials and the supplier delivered them the next day. Three days later I landed a job with a local landlord doing fix-up work on his rentals. He heard of me through Zeke.

I bought a used bicycle to get back and forth to work. Mary Lou thought she'd get more studying done if she stayed in the dorm until the house was more liveable, and I must say I agreed with her. Most of my evenings and weekends went into making the house liveable.

The fish and game service sent a man to check out the pond. He said it was in pretty bad balance—too many small blue gill bream—and suggested poisoning and restocking it in the spring. I said I had in mind a different method.

"And what might that be?"

"A fishing contest," I said, giving him a wink.

He had been raised knowing how to make farm ponds into good fishing holes long before he had learned all that scientific stuff at Auburn. He smiled and left.

Every day for the next two weeks, I threw a pail of Jim Dandy puppy chow into the pond near one side of the bank. Then I put a sign out on the road saying, "Overstocked fishing pond needs thinning out." Nearly every day after that found several Negro boys and sometimes their parents emptying that pond of the bream I had trained to come to the bank for dinner. I had them throw back the small bass they caught but let them keep the big ones—two five pounders and a whopper going just over seven

pounds. Those monsters would have eaten the little bass that needed to grow up and eat the bream.

Every few days I covered the garden plot with baby chick scratch feed that Donnie hauled out to the house from a farm supply store. That attracted a bunch of starlings, doves and crows. Before long the fishermen didn't need to buy worms. They just borrowed my shovel and pitchfork and in a few minutes had plenty of bait for a day's fishing. And in digging worms, they turned the garden.

The house was liveable by mid-November. Zeke found a used stove that he gave to Mary Lou and me for a housewarming present. Donnie helped us move her stuff out to the house the week before Thanksgiving. We planned to take the Greyhound up to Birmingham for Thanksgiving dinner with her folks, and two days before we were to leave, Zeke offered to sell us his pickup. He said he had in mind buying a new one.

"I can trade it in or sell it to you. Might make your life easier to have something to drive around in, and you can pay me for it over time," he offered.

It was a '59 Ford, pretty dinged up but it ran okay. I asked what he wanted for it.

"Oh, about \$400."

"How much a month?"

"Say, \$25?"

I gave him \$25 and drove him home. That was before Alabama required title registration for vehicles.



Over Thanksgiving dinner we told Mary Lou's parents that we had gotten married. They didn't seem surprised. All they wanted to know was when and if we

were happy. Well, we said we were mighty happy and that seemed to satisfy them.

On Friday night we went down to the 280 Club, a honkytonk where the locals went to drink and dance, and where some of the over-the-mountain kids sometimes came slumming and to listen to country music. That was before country music was generally popular.

Walking in, we spotted Roland at a corner table, drinking a Blue Ribbon out of a long-neck bottle. Several empties on the table indicated that he had been there a while. He smiled and waved "howdy." We ordered a couple of beers at the bar and sat down with him.

"How you kids doing?"

"Well, not bad, I guess," I said.

"Heard you left Franklin and now are down at Auburn. That right?"

"Yep, you heard right."

"Mind telling me what happened to make you leave? I mean you were so all fired up to go there, I was just wondering about it."

"No, don't mind. You might say that the dean and I had eye problems."

"I don't understand."

"Well, let's just say that we didn't see eye to eye on things, so I decided to leave . . . before I got asked to. Figured that would look better on my record."

"Oh. Well, sometimes that happens, you know."

"Right. You and I didn't exactly see eye to eye on my going there in the first place, did we?"

"Nope."

I didn't know what else to say and he seemed to have run out of talk as well. Nobody said anything for awhile, and I noticed myself getting uncomfortable with the silence. The skin on my back tightened and my feet wanted to move. I twisted my beer bottle in circles. Roland peeled

the paper labels off his Blue Ribbon bottles, one at a time, with fingers as wide as the bottle neck.

Mary Lou, who was taking it all in, asked, "Roland, how are you doing?"

"Not bad, not bad."

"Well, you don't look so good to me, sitting here alone with all those empty bottles in front of you. That's not like you."

"Well, times have changed."

"How do you mean."

"I mean I've had to make certain adjustments I hadn't planned on having to make."

"And?"

"And, I'll just say that it hasn't been all that easy."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I mean with Riley's mother gone—and also his grandmother and Mrs. Murphy—and with him off doing his own thing, well, some of the things we had helped each other with—I don't know how much Riley has told you about all this . . ."

"He told me about it, about all of it."

"Well, I've got to carry the load now."

"I don't know what you mean by carry the load. What are you having to do now that you weren't already doing before?"

"Mostly worrying and being lonely."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, that's most of it."

"I think you need a girlfriend, Roland. Then you wouldn't feel like this," Mary Lou advised.

"Maybe you're right," he said, ordering another beer, his sixth it looked like from the empties in front of him.

We ordered our second round.

Nobody said anything else, and I started feeling uncomfortable again. I squirmed inside for a while, then

asked. "Roland, ever give any thought to dropping all that 'mission' stuff and just doing what you feel like doing?"

"Sure, I think about it sometimes, but that doesn't make it go away."

"Well, then I hope you think on it some more and then do something more than just think about it. Shit, man, there's more to life than being on a mission."

"Yeah, I suppose so, but you don't seem to have that too well figured out for yourself."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, you were all fired up to go off and learn to be a minister and then preach to everybody, just like you're preaching here to me right now without me asking to be preached to. What's the difference? We both seem to be hellbent on our missions, don't we?"

Mary Lou just sat there, smiling, nodding her head. All of a sudden, I didn't feel so good myself and decided I would feel a whole lot better if we stopped talking. In fact, I wished that I had never started talking in the first place.

"Roland," Mary Lou interjected, "You're welcome to come down to Auburn for a visit if you like. We've got plenty of work around the place we rented, and the pond out back ought to be pretty good fishing along about April when the bream go to bedding. The backyard's full of dove right now and I hear the rabbit hunting's pretty good, too. The Negro families all have rabbit dogs and nearly always bring us a rabbit to eat when they come over to fish."

"I just might take you up on that offer, just might do that."

"I'd like that," Mary Lou said.

"Me too," I added.

Then it got quiet again and it seemed time to leave. Mary Lou told Roland he didn't have any business driving home full of beer, especially since he was a deputy sheriff and a role model for the boys at the sheriff's ranch, so she

took his keys and led him by the hand out to his car. I followed them to his house and hugged him goodbye.

Driving back to Mary Lou's parents' house, I was careful not to bring up the subject of missions and I was mighty glad that Mary Lou didn't bring it up, either.



Next morning, I drove by the bridge on 280 and saw a sheriff's car parked in the pull-off area. I figured Roland was down by the dam. It had rained heavily all week and water was bursting over the top, crashing into the rocks and pool below, throwing up a fine mist that I felt as I got out of the truck.

Over the roar of the waterfall, Roland couldn't hear me walking up behind him. I eased up to the rail beside him. We greeted each other silently and together watched the mist rising from the bottom of the fall. Tumbling in the turbulent water below was a large brown log, its bark peeled off by the river, washed down from somewhere above. It tumbled trapped in the back flow, going nowhere.

After a while, Roland nodded his head toward his car and said, "I've got to be going, due at a meeting down at the Boys' Ranch in about a half-hour. Good seeing you, Riley. I'll be coming down for a visit before too long." I walked up to the highway with him. We said our goodbyes and he drove away.

When Mary Lou and I returned to Auburn that afternoon, a letter from my draft board, forwarded from the Kundalina post office, waited in our mailbox. The letter said that a recent change in the draft policy required that I report to my nearest recruiting station unless I was a father or a full-time student who had elected a student deferment.

I felt like I had been kicked in the balls, and if you are a woman reader and of course don't know what that feels like, I've heard it's sort of like having a natural childbirth but doesn't hurt as long.

I showed the letter to Mary Lou, and she looked like she'd just taken a big bite out of a rotten Kundalina carp.

"I'm going out for a walk and to think," I said, and left the house.

My mind raced about how to solve the unsolvable. I knew Mary Lou still didn't want a baby, and even if she did, it probably was too late to do anything about it. It was the same for school. Even if I enrolled in some sort of graduate course at Auburn for the upcoming quarter, it probably would be too late.

I went back to the house and Mary Lou had dinner prepared. We ate in quiet and then went to bed. She stroked my back until I fell asleep.

I dreamed I was in a stockade. Standing outside was a Buddhist monk. He gave me a big, warm smile.



Nam

Faced with the draft, I enlisted and took my six-week basic training at Ft. Benning next to Columbus, Georgia, just a hop, skip and jump from Auburn. It might as well have been a thousand miles away because I didn't get off the base during training.

Then I was sent to Ft. Rucker, down near Dothan in south Alabama, where I trained for six months as a helicopter mechanic. That was better. I got weekends off and Mary Lou came and shacked up with me in a nearby motel.

The first time we checked in, she showed the man behind the desk her ring to let him know we were legal. He looked like he hadn't seen the sun in years, like the only light he ever saw was the dim light that filtered through smoke-filled bars.

He grinned out one side of his mouth and said, "Miss, it don't matter none to me if you're married or not. But if you just want the room for a little while, I can let you have it at a special rate."

As it turned out, all the motels except the Holiday Inn had special rates to accommodate the prostitutes who hung out around the base. Cars came and went all night, every night. But we were so busy making love—or so tired from it—that the traffic didn't bother us. But my going off and risking my neck did.

War resistance was mounting, along with war casualties. To be truthful, we were miserable, and it didn't

make it any easier for us to think about the fact that Mom and Dad never saw each other after he left for the war. He still lay buried in some unmarked grave in Germany. Or maybe he wasn't buried at all. We never knew.



I went directly from Ft. Rucker to Vietnam to service choppers. About two months later, I was transferred to a different base. In route, one of our main rotor blades was damaged by ground fire, and right away what happened to Dad flashed before me. Fortunately, we managed to spiral down and crash land in a rice paddy, and nobody was seriously injured. We walked away from the crash, right into the hands of a patrol of enemy troops that marched us straight away to a nearby jungle stockade.

One day into the third rice-and-palm-leaf-eating week, I looked through the bamboo fence and saw a Buddhist monk talking with one of the officers in the compound. The monk turned, walked over to me, smiled, and then walked away into a hut. A few minutes later he returned with another officer who opened the gate and motioned for me to follow. We walked to another building and went inside where there was yet another officer.

In broken English, he said, "You go him," pointing at the monk. Then I was dismissed without further explanation. The monk took me by the sleeve and led me out the back door, out of sight of the stockade. We walked out of the camp and traveled a jungle path for what seemed like a couple of miles until we came to another clearing where several monks stood before a shrine that resembled the one in Mrs. Murphy's living room, only much larger.

Although not a word had been spoken, a monk, who looked much older than the one who brought me, said in

perfect Oxford English, "We are pleased to have you here and to be able to assist you. This unfortunate war sometimes traps those who have no reason to be in it. We will help you return to your base. Take this amulet and wear it. It will protect you."

He handed me a necklace on which hung a small, round medallion that resembled the one in the envelope from Dad. I put it on, and then I was given a canteen of water and a satchel containing cooked rice and vegetables. The monk who brought me motioned for me to follow. He led me to a road of sorts under the jungle canopy and motioned me to walk down it, pointing the direction. I began to walk.

After about three miles, I was stopped by an enemy patrol. They surrounded me, then saw the amulet. Waving me to pass, they melted back into the jungle. This happened twice more before I reached a GI compound, perhaps twenty miles from where the monk left me. The captain in charge asked me how in the hell I had made it to them. I told him the story and showed him the amulet. He looked at me like I was nuts.

After I was helicoptered back to my base, my commanding officer had a similar reaction, only stronger. He sent me in for a complete check up at the hospital, including a psychiatric evaluation. The shrink, who wasn't much older than me, shook his head in obvious disbelief after I told my story.

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"Sure, how else can you explain my getting out?" I asked.

"I can't, but I think there is a logical explanation that you're hiding from me," he said, pushing his glasses up on top of his head and leaning back in his chair.

"Well, that's my story and it's always going to be my story. I'll take a lie-detector test on it," I offered.

"Corporal Strange, if you can make up a cock-and-bull story like that, then you certainly can fool a polygraph machine. I'm recommending that you be taken out of combat—hell, out of the service for that matter. We don't need your type in this man's army. No siree. Shit, if the other men hear this nutty story, there's no telling how it will affect some of the near-loonies we already have too many of over here. No, Mister, you're out of here pronto before you contaminate anybody else!"



I returned to Auburn in mid-November 1968 with a medical discharge and full veteran's rights. I hitchhiked from Ft. Rucker where the Army transport plane had carried me. I wanted to surprise Mary Lou, so I called Donnie and got him to run me out to the house.

Mary Lou was sitting on the front porch when we drove up. She stood and leaned, one hand against a porch column. Walking toward her, I saw that she wanted to cry but wouldn't let herself. I grabbed her off the porch and swung her around and around in the yard, hugging her and kissing all over her face, as Donnie drove off.

It was an unseasonably warm day, nearly 70 degrees. The place looked great. The house and barn had been painted and the fences mended. The garden was full of winter vegetables and half again as big as it had been. Several chickens and guinea fowl were feeding out back of the house near the garden; ducks and geese were by the pond and a yearling Appaloosa stallion was in the pasture. A beagle hound and black-and-white cat—a second-generation Hector and Heathcliff—lounged on the front porch.

"Zeke, Donnie and the fishing families did all this, didn't they?" I asked.

"And Roland, too," Mary Lou added.

"Roland?"

"He came down for a few days after you were reported missing in action. I was a wreck, and he was helpful in many ways."

"In what ways?" I asked suspiciously.

She looked down and away, then turned, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Every way. I got lonely. Now I wish like hell it hadn't happened. But it did and I can't live with you and lie about it."

I turned around and walked outside, slamming the door. The world spun around me. I needed something to hit. No, to kill. I wanted Roland—the sonofabitch, my best friend! He just had to get even for my abandoning the mission. Goddamn him! I'll fucking kill him!

I kicked a half-empty paint bucket out to the pond. Each time I kicked it, I saw Roland's grinning face. When I reached the pond, the bucket was all caved in in the middle and a trail of white paint led from my pants legs and shoes back to the house, back to Mary Lou. Sonofabiiitch!!! I can't kill Roland over this. He's my friend. Goddamn Mary Lou! Goddamn women!

I sat there, moaning about the injustice of it all, until the moon cast its reflection into the pond. My brain was on fire, one thought after another: getting divorced, divvying up our assets, leaving Auburn to go I didn't know where. My whole life ruined because my best friend had fucked both ends of my wife while I was off getting my celibate ass shot at. It hurt. Damn, it hurt. Then the tears came in buckets.

I must have fallen asleep because I didn't hear Mary Lou walk up and sit down beside me.

"Riley, I'm sorry I hurt you," she said, startling me. "I wish it had never happened. All these years, there was never anybody else. But after I got the MIA notice, I just knew that you had been killed like your father. Riley, I

never thought I'd see you again. Oh, Riley, I'm so sorry," and then she cried and cried and cried.

By and by, she quit and I asked if she had talked to Roland about my not coming back before they jumped in bed together.

"Yes, he said it couldn't be predicted, that it could go either way."

"So why didn't you wait to find out which way it would go?"

She sat there, quiet for about a minute.

"I guess I should have. I'm sorry. But I never expected to see you again. That's the God's truth!"

I stood and walked toward the house, her footsteps sounding close behind. Once inside, I stripped to my shorts and tee-shirt, pulled a quilt and extra pillow out of the linen closet, and lay down on the couch. Mary Lou went into the bedroom, closing the door. I heard her crying. I wanted her to cry a lot. Then I remembered Wanda, and I didn't like remembering that.

That night I dreamed about Wanda giving me a blow job. I ejaculated, and it felt like my insides were coming out. She clamped my dick tightly between her tongue and palate, squeezing the semen out with her hand, swallowing it, then squeezing the last bit out and swallowing that, too. I never came in my sleep when I didn't wake up, and this time when I woke up, Mary Lou held my throbbing dick firmly in her mouth.



The next morning, I told her about Wanda, about how jealous I had been about her and other men. She shook her head, smiling. I expected her to throw a tantrum of her own, but instead she said there were times when

she was tempted but she never felt like going all the way, not until she was faced with my not coming back.

By this time she had my bathrobe untied and held my rising dick, rubbing it against her crotch, just like the first time in the Cahaba River under the bridge. I yanked off her robe, picked her up, sat her on the kitchen table, and ate her precisely where I would have eaten the oatmeal she had prepared for breakfast. She came with her legs wrapped so tight around my neck that it nearly choked the life out of me. Then I fucked her good and proper.

After breakfast, Mary Lou did something amazing, at least I thought it was amazing. A fly buzzed against the kitchen window over the sink, trying to get outside. She walked over beside the sink and started talking: "Now look here, Mr. Fly, I know you don't like it in here and would like to get out, and I'd like to help you do that. So if you'll just follow me, I will escort you out the front door."

You can imagine my shock to see her walk to the front door with that fly trailing behind, buzzing all around her head. She opened the main door, then the screen door, and out zoomed the fly. She didn't even give me a second look, walking butt-naked by me into the bedroom to get dressed.

She returned to the kitchen and sat down on one of the kitchen chairs to put on her tennis shoes. Looking up, her right eye cocked, she said, "Riley, about that thing I did with the fly—those Pleiadeans aren't the only ones who can do weird things, but I don't want anybody else but you to know, okay?"

"Sure, I mean, who would believe it anyway? Say, how long have you been able to do that sort of stuff—talk to bugs, I mean?"

"Oh, about all my life."

"You talk to other animals, too, right?"

"Sure, all of them. Even fish. Even snakes."

"What do you mean, even snakes?"

"Just this, if I hadn't been along on the dam with you that day, then that cottonmouth might have gone for your dick rather than for your fishing pole, silly."

"Oh. So I guess it behooves me to not make you mad whenever any of your animal friends are around?"

"Or any other time, either!" she laughed.



The Mockingbird

Zeke dropped by to welcome me back. He was curious about me getting out before my enlistment time was up. Figuring he wouldn't understand Buddhist magic, I told him the story that after my helicopter was shot down I slept by day and walked out by night through enemy-controlled territory until I found a GI base. During the walk out, I drank ground water and contracted malaria, and as a result, was sent home with a medical discharge.

That satisfied him, and we sat down for lemonade on the front porch that now had a chain swing and two rockers.

"I think I outsmarted myself by agreeing to sell you this place for just \$17,000," Zeke chortled.

"Well now, if I hadn't come along, maybe you would have sold it for a lot less."

"Maybe so, but it still looks like you cut yourself a pretty good deal there, Riley. Any chance you won't execute on that there option?"

"Nope, I plan to buy the place as agreed. Now I can get a GI loan on it, making it real easy to buy."

"So be it," Zeke said.

The next day he came by while I was working outside and handed me an envelope. Inside were two tickets to the upcoming Auburn-Alabama game the Saturday after Thanksgiving at Legion Field.

"Thought you and Mary Lou might enjoy seeing the game while you were up that way visiting her folks.

Scarcer than hen's teeth, those tickets are. If anybody knew I had them, I wouldn't have heard the end of the begging until I parted with them, and the ones who didn't get them would've bitched and moaned for months."

What could I say? He had just given me the most valuable thing a man could give another man in the state of Alabama. If I refused the tickets, Zeke would be offended, maybe even think I was nuts like the Army psychiatrist thought. Every man has his own way of measuring another man's state of mind, and Zeke's method was probably as good as any. I thanked him and took the tickets.

We went up to Kundalina for Thanksgiving dinner with Mary Lou's folks. They wanted to know all about my narrow escape, and I told them my public story. Mary Lou's folks seemed mighty proud of me and I didn't want to do anything to make them feel otherwise. They were concerned about the malaria and I told them an army doctor had said it might bother me from time to time, but if it did I could go to the Veterans' Hospital in Birmingham and get treated for free.

The next day was the day of the big game. Mary Lou decked herself in spike heels, a tight skirt and a heavy, blue wool sweater—blue being one of Auburn's colors. In her hair, a pair of big orange ribbons represented Auburn's other color. I had only seen her dress up like that one other time—at our high school graduation dance—except that time she wore daffodils instead of ribbons in her hair. Today it was raining, and draped over her arm she carried a green army-surplus parka. It was an interesting ensemble.

Alabama was favored, as had been the case for several years. Auburn hadn't won but two games since the Bear returned in 1959. Led by all-American linebacker Gusty Yearout, the Tigers hoped this would be their year to turn back the Tide.

It rained all morning and was to rain the entire game, with the wind blowing thirty miles an hour down the field. Auburn jumped out to a quick 3-0 lead as a result of a good field goal kick from the right-side hashmark. That's how the half ended, and that was the score until early in the fourth quarter on the rain-drenched, muddy field.

After a short, into-the-wind Auburn punt, all-American quarterback Kenny "Snake" Stabler brought the Tide to the line of scrimmage. As the play unfolded—a quarterback option to the right—a gaping hole appeared in the left side of the Auburn defense. Stabler slithered through and streaked for the coffin corner, winning the race to the end zone by inches. I never got out of my seat.

The thundering roar on Alabama's side of the stadium was deafened by Auburn's stunned silence. Then Ralph "Shug" Jordon, the Auburn coach, raced out on the field, arguing that the Tide offense had flat-out tackled Gusty Yearout, enabling Stabler to score. But the play stood. Alabama won, 7-3.

After the game, Auburn fans vanished to their lairs, as they always did, win or lose. The restaurant and bar owners hated it when Auburn won, because the Alabama fans were too sick to go out and whoop it up after the game. But this year there would be plenty of "Roll Tides" heard on the streets of Birmingham. The restaurant and bar owners would once again say a silent prayer of thanks to Bear Jesus, whose walking-on-water pictures were familiar fixtures in their establishments.

The next morning I drove by Roland's house. His county car was parked out front, so I got out and knocked on his front door. He was dressed for work, but he said he had about fifteen minutes to talk, so we went inside and sat down. I told him what had really happened in Vietnam and showed him the amulet.

"See? Although you turned your back on us, we haven't turned ours on you!" he said, smiling.

"Roland, Mary Lou told me about you and her while I was gone. So I don't rightly understand how you can say you didn't turn your back on me."

"Right now it doesn't make sense to you, but some day you will understand," he said, unexpectedly.

Not knowing what to say to that, I upped and left. We drove back to Auburn the next morning.



Mary Lou had been pre-hired as the associate vet at Cahaba Heights Veterinary Clinic, and I knew I could find plenty of work in the Birmingham area, given my construction background and mechanical skills. So we made plans to move back.

In March 1969, we got a six percent VA loan commitment for the full purchase price on Zeke's place. Then just before the closing, he offered to take back a six percent mortgage for the full amount. He said he didn't want all his money at once because of the taxes he would have to pay. I was pleased because it meant I didn't have to use my VA loan commitment. We closed the deal a month later at his lawyer's office. The monthly payments with taxes and insurance added on were just under \$140.

That June we advertised the place for rent. Within a week a young doctor from the vet school—one of Mary Lou's teachers, in fact—signed a year's lease beginning in August for \$250 a month. Then we went up to Birmingham to find a place to live. We looked mostly down in Shelby County where land was cheaper than closer in to the city.

We wanted another place like ours in Auburn and we found one down on Valley Dale Road, south of Kundalina, about a mile west of Highway 280. It had a white frame farm house with a porch on three sides. The

house needed a new roof and paint, but it was a far sight better than the Auburn house when we first got it.

There were nearly nine acres of land, with an all-weather stream flowing through the back of the partially fenced property. It was bounded on the south by Valley Dale Road and on the north by a pine ridge that the real estate agent said was owned by U.S. Steel and not likely to ever be sold.

The place was tied up in an estate. The original owners had died and none of their children wanted to live there. The executor wanted \$175 a month rent and was willing to give a three-year lease with an option to buy for \$22,000. Having done so well at Auburn, we didn't see how we could lose. We signed the lease to begin in July and paid the first month's rent as a deposit.

In early July, I rented a U-Haul truck and Donnie and I carried our stuff up. Mary Lou drove ahead in our pickup with Hector and Heathcliff. After we unloaded, Donnie drove the U-Haul back to Auburn and returned it to the rental place. We left Mary Lou's Appaloosa, Ranger, in the care of the vet doctor and his family, who promised to board him until we fenced our place.

Mary Lou started studying right away for the state vet exam, and I went out and bought chickens and guineas for fresh eggs and to take care of any poisonous snakes that might be hanging out around the place. Even though Mary Lou said she had cast a spell on them, I didn't want to leave anything to chance.

I selected a garden site, paid a local boy to turn it with his father's tractor, and then planted it. A little scratch feed on the garden every day kept the chickens, guineas and wild birds in the garden, providing the food the crops would need.

I landed a job with Jackson Realty in Homewood, which managed several large over-the-mountain apartment complexes. Mary Lou was tired of driving the truck, which

was sort of like driving a mule, and besides, I needed it for my job. So we bought her a used Volkswagen bug for \$400. Jackson paid me an extra \$150 on top of my \$500 monthly salary for furnishing my own truck.



About a month after I went to work for Jackson, I got a package in the mail from Dr. Rankin, my old psychology professor. In tatters, it had been all over the place, first to Kundalina, then to Auburn, before getting to me. Inside was a letter and an autographed copy of his first novel, *Sing, Mockingbird Sing*, which he said was coming out from Harper & Row in the fall. He wanted to know if I had gone to law school and how my life was going.

I wrote back, congratulating him on the book and briefly explaining about law school and seminary. I said that, for the moment, I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I mailed the letter and started reading his book.

It was about a young man who wanted to be an artist, but his father, a wealthy farmer in northwest Alabama, wanted him to stay in farming, to take over the family business. A long power struggle ensued, and just as the son was about to give into his father's wishes, something happened that changed his life forever.

Late one afternoon he walked down the dirt road from his father's home to the barn to milk their cows. Along the road ran a cedar split-rail fence, and on the top rail sat a mockingbird singing its fool head off. The son stopped in his tracks, unable to pass the noisy mockingbird, which sang on without giving him so much as a sideways glance. Finally, the mockingbird flew away, allowing the son to move on. But he didn't move on. Instead, he turned and walked back to his father's house

to tell him that he could not be a farmer, that he had to paint in the same way that the mockingbird sang—for himself and for God, without caring a diddle if anybody was listening or if anybody would pay for what he painted. Of course, that caused quite a rift between them, and the rest of the book was about how that was resolved.

Not long after I finished the book, which I very much enjoyed, Dr. Rankin wrote back to say how unfortunate he thought it was that I had not been able to complete my ministerial training. That night I had a dream that changed my life.

In the dream, I stood in a pulpit before the brass elevators inside the marble entrance into City Federal Savings & Loan. I preached about the true essence of church to the people who worked in the building. I said that none of the real ministers in history had used a fancy church building for their ministry. Rather, a true church was one where people felt close to God and to each other; a place where people came of their own free will, not out of guilt or to impress others; a place that existed only as long as the congregation and the minister wanted it to exist.



Disposable Church

The next week, I checked into the legalities of running a church and discovered that all an aspiring minister in Alabama needed was a \$25 ministerial business license. There were no other requirements.

I talked it over with Mary Lou. She was, of course, intimately familiar with my views about things. Although she was concerned about the flack we would probably catch, she said that she would likely go along with my harebrained scheme if I promised not to talk about extraterrestrials. But she asked me to give it more thought before I proceeded.

After a month of thinking on it, the urge was only stronger, and we agreed I should do it. The church had to operate on a shoestring, so I checked out some inexpensive meeting places. The local motels were the best places for the price. Almost all the major ones had conference rooms for rent already set up for about fifty bucks a meeting.

I settled on the Holiday Inn at the intersection of Airport Road and I-20, east of Birmingham. The marquee was readily visible from both of those busy roads, and the location was easily reachable by half of Birmingham.

I was prepared to hold four Sunday meetings at my own expense. If the idea took off and the people who came to the first meetings wanted me to keep it going, then I figured they'd pay the weekly fee without much prompting on my part. That would be the only cost because I had a

good-paying job and wasn't planning to take any money for myself.

The Saturday before the first service, the hotel put on the marquee, "Dispensable Church. Sundays, 10:00 a.m." There is no telling how many people driving by saw that advertisement. When I arrived about nine-thirty on Sunday, three people sat in the conference room. By ten, fourteen people sat at long tables like people at a business conference. Five were black. Two looked like they had spent the night in the street.

Standing at the podium, I introduced myself as a defrocked seminary student who had been asked to end my ministerial studies because I had not bowed to the school policy of making its rich alumni happy so they would continue to give money to the school.

"In that respect," I said, "in this church, if that is what it is—perhaps it's just an opportunity to talk about what troubles us—anyway, I will not mention money except for today. And now all I will say is that this room costs \$50 a meeting and I'm prepared to pay for the first four meetings out of my own pocket. I do not plan to take for myself any money you donate. I have a job that takes care of my money needs.

"If you want to keep this church going, then put whatever amount you wish in that plastic bucket you see by the door on your way out. Whatever you give over and above what is needed to pay the next week's rent, I will give to somebody who really needs it," I said, looking toward the two who looked like they lived on the street.

"Now I will stop and give you a chance to ask questions."

One man wanted to know where I was from.

"Kundalina, born and raised there."

A woman wanted to know where I had gone to seminary.

"Franklin Seminary, up in Nashville. I took my undergraduate work at Alabama down in Tuscaloosa."

Another woman wanted to know why I was doing this.

I told her about my City Federal dream about preaching.

"What do you do for a living, if you don't mind my asking, Mr. Strange?" another woman asked.

"I do repair and maintenance work for Jackson Realty in Homewood."

"With a college education?"

"Yes ma'm."

"Why?"

"Because that's what I like doing."

"But you spent all that time in college learning things."

"Yep, I sure did, but I like what I do. I guess I had to go to college and seminary to find that out. I bet you know some people who went to college and now have jobs they hate. They don't know how to get along with their wife or husband or kids, they drink too much, their nerves are shot, they're just hanging on by their fingernails—like most of you, right?"

"How can you say that about us, if you don't know us?" a large black man asked.

"Just an educated guess. Either you came out of curiosity, or you came here because you are hurting inside and want relief. And even if you came out of curiosity, I bet that deep inside, you hurt. You don't have to answer that if you don't want to."

The man looked at me, brow furrowed, saying nothing. I looked back. He smiled. I smiled.

"One thing about this church that you've probably already noticed is that it's racially integrated. That may bother some of you white people, and it may bother some of you black people. Jesus never turned his back on

someone because of color or beliefs, and neither will I. You may have a problem with this at first, but I believe that if you stick around for awhile, you won't have that problem anymore."

A rather large, older white woman said, "Mr. Strange, this is all very nice, but when are you going to start feeding us, I mean when will you make your sermon?"

I smiled. "Ma'am, this is my sermon. There's always going to be this sort of give-and-take in this church. I'm not coming in here with any prepared speeches to bore you. Sure, I'm laying out some ground rules, but you will see if you hang around that you and the rest of the folks here will determine the topic of the day. And if you run out of topics, or if you quit paying the rent, or if I feel my calling here is up, then this church will dispense forthwith. So do you have something you wish to discuss? No doubt, it will probably be of interest in one way or another to just about everyone here."

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Tell us about it."

"Well, you see, well it's, uh, hard for me to talk like this before other people . . ."

"I know what you mean. The first time I spoke before the student body at Shades Valley High School, I peed in my pants. It was awful, feeling it running down into my socks."

She and about five other people broke out laughing. Others had the strangest looks on their faces.

"Look here, this church is for people, not saints. You can bet your boots that Jesus nearly peed in his pants the first time he addressed the synagogue. Heck, maybe he even did. Maybe that's why he didn't go home that day. He was afraid Mary would get on his case about wetting his britches!"

More laughter, fewer strange looks. The large black man with whom I had exchanged smiles looked like he was about to pee in his pants.

"So tell us about your concern. If you pee in your pants, you will be in good company."

By now the woman was laughing so hard, she couldn't talk. Finally, she calmed down and said, "It just don't seem all that important anymore, now that you've got me to laughing so."

"That's a good observation, Ma'am. A lot of things we think are important, wrong even, quit seeming that way after we start laughing. But sometimes it helps, once we are happy, to look again at what we were mad about. Often it's easier to learn when we are happy than when we are mad—or sad—so why don't you tell us what was bothering you before everything got so funny."

"Well, it's about my son-in-law. He's just awful to my daughter. Runs around on her, beats her up, spends his money on whiskey, leaving her and their kids without enough to get by on half the time. It just breaks my heart. I try to get her to do something about it, but she never does."

"I bet everybody here has seen this sort of awful thing, right?"

Heads nodded.

"Now, it's hard to say what we should do in a case like this. I mean, if you call the cops, then you'll probably be cussed out by the person you're trying to help—in this case, Ma'am, your daughter, right?"

"Most likely."

"Does she come complaining to you about him?"

"Yeah, rather frequently."

"Well, by listening to her complain, do you give her a chance to release some of the pressure?"

"Sure."

"And do you think if you keep doing that, the pressure in her will ever get so high that she will finally do something to help herself?"

"I suppose you have a point there."

"When she comes and talks to you about him, does she ask you to help her figure out solutions?"

"Always."

"And does she ever take your advice?"

"No."

"And does that make you mad at her?"

"She's my daughter."

"I know, but it does make you mad, doesn't it?"

"To be truthful, it does. But that's bad, isn't it?"

"What's bad about getting mad when somebody asks for help and when you give it, they ignore you?"

"Well, the Bible says to forgive."

"Sure, and you can forgive your daughter, but not when you pretend you aren't mad at her when you really are. To forgive someone, you first have to admit to yourself that you are mad at them."

"You mean I should tell her when I'm mad at her?"

"Why not? Jesus certainly did plenty of that with people, didn't he?"

"Now that you mention it, he did."

"There's more to this, though."

"What else is there?"

"Aren't you mad at yourself for falling time after time for your daughter's cries for help, when you know she won't take any help offered?"

"I never thought about it before, but I guess I am."

"And aren't you mad at your daughter for not being the kind of daughter you wanted her to be?"

Silence.

"And aren't you mad at yourself for not having raised her better? You don't have to answer, but please think about this. You see, I think your problem here is you

have a lot of anger you don't recognize—anger at your daughter, but, more important, anger at yourself. This is what makes this whole experience so hard on you.

"You can't stop a grown person from walking out in front of a bus if that is what she is determined to do. Eventually, when you aren't looking, she'll go out there and get smashed. So you have to quit trying to save your daughter; you have to quit playing a game that makes you hate you and her both. You might find that as soon as you quit doing that, something will change. Most likely, all hell will break loose at first, but if you hold your ground and let her rail at you without you attacking back, without getting angry in your heart at her, then you will begin to heal, and maybe she will begin to heal, too.

"She needs more than anything for you to be firm without rejecting her. It's darn hard to do, especially with one of your own children when they are in pain, but it's the only chance you have to help her, and even then there are no guarantees that she will change. But, almost certainly, you will change, and then her behavior won't drive you crazy anymore.

"It might not be comfortable, but you will be able to manage a whole lot better because, by doing what I have suggested, you will detach, tend to your side of this problem, and turn her side over to God to help her solve. Then it will be between her and God. And who knows what God might come up with if you get out of the way? Right now, there's no space for God in her life because you're trying to play God to her, aren't you?"

I stopped talking and met her gaze. We locked eyes for about fifteen seconds, then she burst into tears. A woman just to her right embraced her.

"Please don't do that, Ma'am. She was just beginning to feel the healing power of God. Now she feels you instead. Let God hold her."

The second woman released her hold. I was quiet and let the older woman finish grieving. Then I faced the one who had tried to help.

"Your urge to help her is like her urge to help her daughter. Well intended, but not as powerful as letting God do it. If she had just learned her daughter had been killed in an accident, that would be different. Then it would be appropriate to hold and comfort her. But that is not what happened."

I couldn't read how the second woman took it, but after the service she came up to me and said, "Mr. Strange, you taught me something, something very important I think. Thank you and God bless you."

"And God bless you, Ma'am. We all need to feel blessed by God."

There was just over \$100 in the bucket. On my way home I dropped \$56 off at Brother Bryan's Mission in downtown Birmingham. When I got home, Mary Lou was sitting on the front porch swing with Hector and Heathcliff. On her right shoulder was a bluebird.

"How'd it go, Mr. Elmer Gantry?" she teased.

"Not bad, not bad at all. Had a pretty good turnout, paid this week's rent with some left over—and didn't get myself lynched . . . yet."



Attitude Adjustment

Nearly forty people showed up the next week. The woman whose husband was getting drunk and beating her and their children came—with her mother. She was fit to be tied, mad as hell at me for turning her mother against her. I asked if she wanted to try to use this change in her life as an opportunity to change herself, and she asked, "What do you mean by that?!"

"I mean, Ma'am, that you've got yourself into a pretty awful mess, haven't you? Do you want to live this way the rest of your life, or do you want do something about changing it?"

She sat, glaring, so I let it go. A woman behind her who had been at the first meeting said, "Miss, I believe this man can help you if you let him."

She continued glaring, saying nothing.

The other woman tried to persuade her, and I interrupted.

"Look at what's happening right now. She's clearly in pain but doesn't want my help—or yours. And you keep trying to give it to her. Do you see how that makes her resist all the more?"

"I guess it does," replied the second woman.

"I wonder, and perhaps I'm off base here, but I wonder if this is something that happens to you often—offering help to those who need it and then trying harder when they decline?"

"Sometimes that happens," she mumbled.

"Remember last week when we talked about this, about trying to help people who didn't want our help, about how that just sets us up to get mad at them when they reject us?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"This is the same thing, isn't it? I think you probably do this a lot more than you care to think, and if I'm right, you spend a lot of time resenting people for not taking your advice, accepting your help and so forth."

Silence. The other woman, the one with the abusive husband, watched me closely.

"I have a hunch that the reason you want so badly to help people in distress is that there's something about them, about their situation, about their pain, that reminds you of yourself, of your own life, of your own pain. Deep down, you figure that if you can stop them from hurting, you will stop your own hurting, right?"

"I don't know about that. The Bible says we should help others, be good Samaritans."

"Sure, but Jesus also told his disciples to shake the dust off their shoes on the doorstep of any place they weren't welcome and leave, didn't he?"

"But he was talking about preaching the Gospel."

"Well, isn't giving somebody advice about how to live a better life preaching the Gospel to them?"

Silence.

"When you try to tell somebody else how to live—especially when they aren't open to hearing what you have to say, doesn't that violate Jesus' teaching about not cramming your own religious views down another person's throat?"

"I don't look at it that way!" she flushed.

"Look, I know I'm making you mad, but do you see why?"

"Yeah, I don't like what you're telling me."

"True, but more important, you don't like me cramming my ideas down your throat."

"No, I sure don't!"

"And this is what Jesus tried to teach. You don't like being forced any more than this poor child sitting in front of you likes it. We learned last week that she got plenty of that from her mother, and I would wager that her mother had plenty of other people's ideas crammed down her throat when she was a child, too."

"And after she grew up!" the daughter exclaimed.

"How, so?" I asked.

"I mean, my father was always telling her what to do. It was awful. I hated her for letting him do that to her—and to me."

"So you see why she does it to you?"

"I sure do!"

"Do you think this is related to why you let your husband treat you the way he does? I mean, that's what you were taught—that men are supposed to run all over women, right?"

She looked furious.

I turned back to the second woman.

"Do you see anything in your life that reminds you of this situation?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"What I mean is, have you experienced something like this? Have you been run all over by someone else, by someone important to you, like your parents, your husband, your ministers, your school teachers?"

She burst into tears, crying uncontrollably. After she calmed down, I directed my remarks to the group.

"Look, this is not anything new. Everyone here has had these experiences, and you are mad as hell about it whether you admit that to yourself or not. Instead of doing something to stop this from happening to you anymore, you blame the people who abuse you and take out your

rage on other people or even yourself—by getting sick, drunk, high. Or you go around telling everybody else what they should do, when you don't take your own advice. You all do this, yes?"

Some heads nodded.

"Take this poor woman's husband who stays drunk and beats up her and her children. Why do you think he does that? Because he's mad as hell about something that happened to him, that's why. He takes it out on her instead of on the person he's really mad at. And who do you suppose he's really mad at?"

The woman chimed, "His father for beating him when he was a boy! His father was a drunk, too! They're just alike!"

"That's a piece of it, for sure. But don't you think he hates his mother for not protecting him? For not taking him to a place of safety?"

Her jaw dropped.

"Yes. When you let your husband do this to you and to your children, then they hate you, too. Worse, when they grow up, they will either be abusive like your husband, or they will be victims like you—or they will sometimes be one way and sometimes the other, depending on who they are with. This is what is meant by the Old Testament saying, 'The sins of the fathers are visited on the sons three to four generations.' Today we say this a different way: 'A chip off the old block'; 'Like father, like son'; 'She's the spitting image of her mother.' Is this what you want for your children: for them to grow up and be like your husband—or like you?"

She, too, burst into tears. After crying a while, she got mad, then she got furious.

"That sorry son of a bitch. The next time he lays a hand on me or the kids, I'll call the cops to him!"

"I think you're overlooking something here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, shouldn't you call the cops on *yourself* if this happens again?"

Her face turned ashen.

"You see, don't you, that it is really you that you hate about this? Sure, your husband has mistreated you and your children, but you are the one who is afraid to do anything to stop it. So when you point your finger at him the next time, take a look at where your other three fingers are pointed. This is what Jesus meant when he said, 'Let the one without sin cast the first stone.'"

I stopped. The room was dead silent. There was only \$80 in the bucket at the end of the meeting.



When I got home, Mary Lou knew right away that it hadn't gone as well as the first week.

"Guess you socked it to them today, huh?"

"Yep, that I did."

"Well, you know that bearers of bad news are never well received."

"Or well paid."

"And you're in this to make money?"

Although I wasn't in it for the money, I had certainly measured my effectiveness by the amount in the kitty. It was hard not to adopt an outward measure of value. Then I remembered the only minister I ever heard about that I thought might be a pretty good preacher to know. I had read about him back in the early 1960s in a letter to the editor in the *Birmingham Herald* when a member of his church, which was located over in Mt. Brook, wrote about what had happened the previous week.

The board of deacons, all men, had gathered during the week to discuss the problem of blacks dropping in unexpectedly on white churches. All the deacons

expressed their concern and horror, and they opened the floor for discussion about what to do if blacks ever popped up at their church. They finally agreed that the best course of action was to hire a couple of Mt. Brook off-duty policemen to stand guard and keep any unwanted visitors out.

After the deacons finished, the minister who had sat through the entire meeting without saying a word asked, "Now that everybody else has had their say, are you interested in hearing what I think?" Of course, they were all interested, seeing as how he was their minister.

So he said, "It's like this. If Negroes come to this church and we don't let them worship with us, that will be the last church service performed in this church as long as I'm minister here. I built this church from nothing, the national church owns it, I'm in charge of it, and I will close it if you keep Negroes from worshipping here. Does anyone have anything else to say?"

Of course, nobody did and that was the end of that.



Lynch Mobs

The next week only twenty people came. About half were familiar faces. One unfamiliar face belonged to the husband who was beating his wife and children.

He was enraged. His wife had taken the kids and left. She did it with the help of her brothers who came over to protect her while she packed. She then tried to go live with her mother but was turned away. She and her children were living in a small apartment paid for by her brothers. I already knew about this from her mother, who had tearfully called me at my home to let me know what happened.

"What right do you have to go messing around in a man's family?" the man demanded.

"What right do you have to be a drunk, beat your wife and children, and be mad at me for teaching her how to protect herself and your children from you?" I replied.

He stood, squaring off.

"Mister," I said, "I don't know you other than what I've heard about you from your mother-in-law and wife, but I have a pretty good idea that if it's a fight you are looking for, you might get the worst of it. But even if you whip me, is that going to solve anything? Is that going to help you with your drinking problem? Is that going to get your wife and kids back?"

Silence.

"My hunch is that you need to sit down and figure out who you really want to fight. Yeah, I know about what

your father did to you. I know how mad you are about that—and about your mother not protecting you. And now here you are mad at your wife for doing the very thing you wanted more than anything for your mother to do, right?"

He flinched, then sat back down.

"Look, your parents did you wrong, no doubt about it. But that doesn't make it right for you to treat your family the same way. Maybe it helps you understand why you do what you do, but it doesn't make it right and you know that in your heart. And in your heart, you also know that the person you are really mad at here is yourself, and if you fight me, or your father or wife, or her brothers about this, then that's just a way to avoid fighting who you really hate—yourself, friend. That's what Jesus meant when he said to forgive your enemies and turn the other cheek. He knew that your real enemy is always yourself."

He bowed his head, placing his brow in his palms. He shook. I waited. He shook a long time. Then he looked up, nodded, and got up and left without saying a word.

I figured that was enough preaching for one day and adjourned the meeting. There was \$120 in the bucket after everybody left.

Driving home after dropping \$70 off at Brother Bryan's, I thought about the many times Jesus told people to seek first the Kingdom of God, and then everything else would fall into place. He was right.



Midway through the week, I received the following registered letter:

Dear Rev. Strange:

It has come to our attention that you are providing psychotherapeutic services to people in Birmingham. If you are providing such services as an ordained minister

or pastoral counselor, please let us know from what seminary you graduated and the degree obtained. Otherwise, please advise us where you received your training in mental health, the nature of that training, and what, if any, licenses you have to practice psychotherapy in the State of Alabama.

Sincerely yours,

Lawanda Highsmith, Ph.D., Director
Alabama Board of Mental Health

I replied as follows:

Dear Dr. Highsmith:

In response to your letter, I hold no ministerial degrees and do not consider myself a "reverend," which title to me connotes "holy"—not an appropriate designation for a mere human being. I have a B.S. degree in psychology from the University of Alabama but have no license to practice psychology or psychotherapy. However, I do not think your Board has jurisdiction over me. Let me explain.

I charge no money for my services, which to me means I am not in the *business* of providing psychotherapy any more than is any friend who gives another friend advice about personal problems.

Next, a minister is not required in Alabama to have graduated from seminary.

Furthermore, my work is based on the *teachings* of Jesus Christ, which predate modern psychotherapy by nearly 2,000 years and which are protected from state interference by the U.S. and Alabama Constitutions.

Perhaps you would like to attend one of our church services to satisfy yourself that all I do at the Dispensable Church is dispense the word of God as taught by Jesus Christ.

Sincerely yours,

Riley Strange

About a month later, I got a registered letter at my home from the Office of the Attorney General of the State of Alabama demanding that I cease practicing psychotherapy. I wrote back that I did not practice psychotherapy and enclosed a copy of my letter to Dr. Highsmith. A month later, a Jefferson County deputy sheriff arrested me in the middle of church service and carried me to the county jail where I was charged with practicing psychotherapy without a license.

It was pretty interesting because over a hundred people were in church that day and darn near every one of them followed us to the jail and watched me get booked and fingerprinted. I wasn't in jail more than a half-hour before I was bailed out by three lawyers hired by different members of the congregation. I was out on the street by lunch time, holding a plastic bucket containing just over \$1,000.



The case was set for trial before Judge George Barber. I talked with a lawyer about it, and he thought I had stated a good defense in my letter to Dr. Highsmith—if I could convince the judge that what was in the letter was true, I would probably win. Since I was a minister, he offered to represent me for only \$30 per hour, but I felt I could do it alone, with perhaps a little help from the Invisible Lawyer who had already advised me to file the following answer in court to the charges against me:

In re: The State of Alabama vs. Riley Strange

To the Honorable Court of the Tenth Judicial Circuit of Alabama:

I, the undersigned, having been charged with practicing psychotherapy without a license in violation of the laws of

the State of Alabama, answer the charge by saying that I do not believe I practice psychotherapy. Rather, I believe I teach people the ways of God as taught by Jesus Christ. However, this issue is not for me to decide. As I see it, the judge of this Honorable Court is a distant relative of God, judging the affairs of men as God judges the affairs of men's souls—as above so below. Therefore, I will abide by whatever decision this Honorable Court, in its wisdom, hands down.

Respectfully submitted,

Riley Strange



When Mary Lou and I got to the courthouse the day of the trial, over a hundred people from the congregation were sitting in the courtroom. There would be no shortage of witnesses.

To my surprise, the first witness the state put on was Lawanda Highsmith. I recognized her right away: blue suit with thickly-padded shoulders, hair pulled tightly into a bun, erect posture, lips pressed together, protruding jaw. I saw her one day at church, but she didn't introduce herself.

Anyway, the D.A. got her to say I was telling people how to deal with problems in their family, connecting the problems to what happened to them when they were kids, telling them that they needed to change their behavior and thinking if they wanted to get better.

"And in your professional opinion, Dr. Highsmith, is that the practice of psychotherapy?" the D.A. asked.

"It sure is!" she declared.

After the D.A. finished, Judge Barber asked if I wanted to ask Dr. Highsmith any questions. I certainly did.

"Dr. Highsmith," I asked, "You came to the Dispensable Church for one service, right?"

"That's correct."

"And while you were there, did you hear me give any advice that any person wouldn't have given a friend in need?"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I mean, suppose you were getting beaten up by your husband and I tried to help you see how that related to how you had let your father beat you up, or how it related to you seeing your mother get beaten up by your father—or both. Would you say that I violated the law for telling you this as a friend?"

"W-w-well, I'm not a lawyer; I c-c-can't say that I can answer that q-q-question," she sputtered.

I paused to give her time to compose herself, then said, "As I recall, the time you were there, a woman asked me about her problems with her son who was running with a pretty rough gang over in Woodlawn. The gang was always getting in fights with other gangs, and he was often coming home all beaten up. She was upset—felt he was going to hell because of this and wanted me to talk with him and get him to change. Do you remember that?"

"Yes sir, I remember."

"Do you remember what I told her?"

"Yes, you said she had her talons in him, had had them in him all his life—that he was rebelling to get away from her."

She stopped.

"Did I tell her anything else?"

"I don't recall."

"Didn't I tell her that my hunch was that she had spent most of her life being a nice little girl, never getting mad at anybody, never getting into a fight; that she had a whole bunch of rage bottled up in her that her son was carrying for her; that if she got honest with herself about

how mad she was about never being allowed to get angry about anything, then her son might quit wanting to fight so much. Didn't I tell her that?"

"Something like that."

"Didn't I also tell her that it was absolutely essential for his spiritual development that he psychologically separate from her, that he quit carrying and venting her anger for her. He couldn't do it directly because he would feel guilty about hurting her feelings, guilt she would probably be glad he felt, so he did it indirectly by running in the gang. Didn't I also tell her that?"

"Yes, I believe you said something like that."

"And didn't I tell her that in order to let her son go, she first had to free herself from her own mother's talons, the person who never let her get angry—that her son simply mirrored what she herself had to do, and that until she did it, she would hang onto her son and he would run in gangs and fight all the time?"

"Yes, you said something like that, too."

"And you say this is the practice of psychotherapy?"

"I believe it is, yes."

"So let me ask you another question, then."

"Okay."

"Didn't I also tell this mother that Jesus told people they could not be his disciples unless they hated their parents, spouses, children and so forth? Didn't I say that Jesus meant by the word *hate* to *separate from and leave behind*, to discard the influences of other people?"

"Yes, sir, you did say that."

"And didn't Jesus, in fact, tell people to leave their parents and friends, to let the dead bury the dead?"

"I'm not sure what he told them. I've never read the Bible."

"And may I inquire why not?"

"Because I don't like religion."

"And why is that?"

"Because of the way it was crammed down my throat when I was a little girl," she said angrily.

"And so you made psychology your religion?"

"Perhaps you could look at it that way."

"Well, in your psychology courses, did they teach you anything about God, about developing yourself as a child of God instead of as the clone of your parents?"

"Not exactly."

"In fact, you weren't taught anything about God in your psychology courses, were you?"

"No."

"And you weren't tested on God in those courses or on your state licensing examinations, were you?"

"No."

"And you don't try to help your clients understand the ways of God, do you?"

"No."

"In fact, you don't particularly like God, do you?"

"Sir, I'm not even sure if there is a God."

"And as Director of the Alabama Board of Mental Health, do you consider yourself a fairly typical psychotherapist?"

No answer.

"What would you say if I suggested that your decision to reject religion and become a psychotherapist was no different from that boy rejecting his mother's views about being nice and never getting angry?"

"I don't understand."

"I didn't figure you would. Would you like for me to try to explain it to you?"

"Well, okay."

The district attorney howled an objection.

"On what grounds do you base your objection?" Judge Barber asked, brow wrinkled, eyes twinkling over his half-rimmed glasses.

"On the ground that what Dr. Highsmith believes or does with her private life is irrelevant to this proceeding."

"Objection overruled. She was the one who instituted this action against Mr. Strange on behalf of the State, and she just asked for his opinion, so I will let him give it. I will take his answer as the opinion of an 'expert' witness, which he has proven to my satisfaction that he is, even if he doesn't have a fancy degree. Please tell her what you think, *Reverend Strange.*"

He looked at me, smiling. I smiled back, then looked Dr. Highsmith dead in the eye and said, "My sense is that you took an opposite stance from your own mother, who I suspect is very religious, and in that way you are just like that boy—both of you are still ruled by your mothers."

The D.A. howled further objections.

"Overruled," Judge Barber said, watching Dr. Highsmith's stunned face with interest.

I waited a few moments before asking, "Tell me, Dr. Highsmith, who came first—Jesus or the Alabama Board of Mental Health? Jesus or the science of psychology?"

Silence.

"Dr. Highsmith, do you charge money for your services as a licensed psychologist?"

"Sure, all mental health professionals charge for their services."

"Well, do you know whether Jesus charged people who came to him for help?"

"I don't suppose he did."

"That's right, he didn't, and neither do I."

I stood and said, "Your Honor, there are about a hundred people in this courtroom who will say I'm teaching them how to apply the wise teachings of Jesus in the modern world. I don't know how many of them you want to hear from, but I've got the time if you do."

He looked at me, paused, then said, "Sir, the only question I have about this case is whether or not you are an ordained minister or pastoral counselor?"

"No, sir, I'm not, but why do you ask?"

"Well, the statute that regulates psychotherapy specifically excludes ordained ministers and pastoral counselors from state regulation, so if you *are* one, that will make my decision mighty easy."

"Well, as I read the law, anybody can be a minister in this state by just buying a county ministerial business license, which I have done, and here it is," I said, handing it to him.

He looked at it and smiled.

"Furthermore and more important," I continued, "Alabama law doesn't give the Board of Mental Health jurisdiction over someone telling other people, without getting paid for it, what Jesus might have said to them about their problems if he were alive today. And even if the law *did* give that jurisdiction to the Board of Mental Health, the law would be unconstitutional under the provisions of the United States and Alabama Constitutions, providing for free religious expression without government interference."

I stopped talking and waited.

Judge Barber tilted his glasses up on top of his head, leaned back in his chair, and said, "I think I agree with you, sir. A minister is given broad latitude to share his beliefs with his flock, and this court takes judicial cognizance of that fact and also of the fact that there are many denominations of churches, each having its own peculiar slant on what the Bible means and how it should be applied. I also know from many personal experiences that there are laws higher than secular laws and courts higher than secular courts. My ruling, therefore, is that the Alabama Board of Mental Health does not have jurisdiction

over your ministry and neither does this court. Case dismissed and costs assessed to the State."

Mary Lou rushed to hug me. We were mashed together by the mob of people from church pushing in to congratulate me. Many of them went directly to Judge Barber to thank him. A flash bulb went off, a photograph taken by a newspaper reporter. The next day the *Birmingham Herald* ran a feature story about the trial and the Dispensable Church. The reporter must have gotten his information from my parishioners.

The next Sunday was standing room only, and the bucket held nearly \$3,000 at the end of the service. The folks down at Brother Bryan's were mighty happy to see me that day.



Mary Lou and I had a quiet dinner at home that night. Outwardly, we were very different. I was attracting public attention like a magnet, whereas she was nearly invisible, but just as much a magnet. Her practice at the clinic was growing by leaps and bounds. Nearly every animal she treated thereafter refused to let anyone else in the clinic touch it unless she came in and petted it first. Of course, petting wasn't all she was doing, and many of the sick ones that seemed headed for the pet cemetery miraculously got well.

"If you keep that up, it won't be long before the others at the clinic will be asking you questions, getting jealous, or accusing you of being a witch," I teased.

We were awakened in the middle of the night by Ranger's whinny and Hector's barking. Then we heard what sounded like nails being hammered. We got out of bed and peeked through the front window.

A bunch of people in white hooded sheets were raising a cross about twenty yards from our front door.

One of them threw what I figured was gasoline on the cross and another lit a match. Before he could throw it on the cross, he jerked his hands over the top of his head and began to flail away at something in the air, fell to the ground in a tight ball, hands protecting his head, screaming at the top of his lungs. Then all the others were doing it.

I didn't have a clue what was happening, but Mary Lou bent over double laughing, holding her sides, barely able to breathe. After a while, they quit screaming, got up and ran yelling down Valley Dale Road. We heard doors open, then more screaming, then loud coughing and gagging. Finally, several pickup trucks started up and roared away, towards the direction of Bessemer.

"Okay, you sorceress, what just happened?" I demanded.

"Oh, first of all the local owls mistook those good old boys for a family of oversized white mice," she grinned.

"And when they got back to their trucks? Was that the owls, too?"

"Naw, that was some really pissed off skunks that live down in the hollow at the end of our property."

"I promise not to tell anybody about this."

"I think that would be a very good idea."

I just looked at her, amazed.

"Wanna make love?" she purred.

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

"No animals in our bed."

"Other than you and me?"

"Right."

Afterwards I dreamed Mary Lou and I were up by the bridge on U.S. 280, throwing ripe Kundalina carp and suckers at northbound cars. Grinning, she gritted a yellow rose sideways in her teeth by the stem.

I awoke at sunrise, chuckling, looking right into Mary Lou's big brown eyes, right into the deepest reaches of her being. I can't explain how I knew she was pregnant.



Revelations

"Understand you might be needing some flowers," Roland said, pulling a potted yellow rose bush out of the back seat of his patrol car. To say I was taken aback would be an understatement, but that was nothing compared to what he said next.

"I checked this morning and our old friends the 'nos are charging the beach at Destin. I'm going down tomorrow after work. Why don't you come along? We haven't been fishing together in a long time."

'No was what we called pompano, another fish that Roland had taught me how to catch. It had been a long time since I had eaten pompano, and there wasn't another saltwater fish that topped it for taste. Scamp were just as good but a lot harder to find because they lived in deep water and you had to have a good boat and sonar, or a lot of luck, to find them.

I was turned upside down. I hadn't seen Roland since that day at his house when I told him that I knew about him and Mary Lou. Although something mysterious deep inside me was aroused, I said that I was supposed to preach Sunday—I had no way to let people know ahead of time that I wouldn't be there.

"Riley, I'd really like for you to go with me, but you have to decide. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon at five-thirty from my place. I'll swing by here on the way down to see if you're going. All you need is some money, clothes

and your tackle. I've made a motel reservation at Capri by the Sea next to the pier."

We had fished the pier in early May several times and did well when the wind blew steady from the southeast. That made the beach current run west, the direction the migrating pompano traveled. When the wind came from the west, the beach current was in their face, and they moved out to deep water.

What was I to do, preach or fish? I talked it over with Mary Lou, and she said she thought I ought to fish. I was reminded of the time under the bridge when she asked me if I wanted to fish or cut bait. Well, fishing had worked out pretty good that time!

So the next day at my lunch break, I drove over to the Holiday Inn and talked with the manager about letting the congregation know something important had come up and I would be back the next Sunday. He was happy to help because a lot of the church crowd had taken to staying over after church to eat Sunday brunch at the motel, and sometimes they sent their out-of-town guests there. He offered to hang a sign outside the meeting room and to put something on the marquee.

When Roland came by the next afternoon in his pickup, I was ready to go. I kissed Mary Lou, threw my gear in the back of the truck, and we headed toward U.S. 31 South. I felt awkward but there was no turning back.

We didn't say anything at first, but after a while I couldn't stand it anymore. So I asked how in the hell he knew Mary Lou was pregnant, since I wasn't even sure she herself knew yet. I hadn't said anything to her about the dream or my "revelation," figuring she would talk about it when she was ready.

"Riley, do you really need to ask such a question after all you know about people from Kundalina, after all the experiences you've had?"

"I guess not, but this sort of stuff still amazes me."

"But you are not amazed by the way you see into people's lives as if they're naked?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Or by the way Mary Lou is with animals, especially when the KKK is around?" he smirked, causing me to catch my breath.

I was afraid to say anything else, so I shut up.

"Riley, there's still a lot you don't know, and that's why we're taking this trip together. It's time for you to learn the real scoop."

All of a sudden, I felt like I was back in Mrs. Murphy's living room. I waited, but he didn't say anything else.



A quiet hour had passed when we approached a car parked on the side of the road with its hood up. Roland pulled over and we got out to see if we could help. An older man tinkered under the hood, and a woman—his wife, I guessed—sat in the passenger seat.

"Lost my water; think it's the water pump," the older man said as we approached.

I shined Roland's flashlight on the water pump and saw shredded gasket material behind it. If that was all it was, I could fix it with some gasket material and glue. Just as I was about to say that we needed to go to a service station, Roland handed me a swatch from his tool carrier, along with several wrenches, a hammer and a tube of glue.

As I dismantled the water pump, Roland talked with the old couple. They said they were headed for their son's home for a visit. They were in disagreement about the trip. She wanted to go, he didn't. The problem was their son, an alcoholic. The father hated being around him.

I pulled the pump and detached the back plate to use as a mold for pinging out a new gasket. As I worked, Roland told them about his work with the young boys at the ranch, about how most of them came from broken homes, homes with alcoholic or absent parents.

I finished the new gasket, glued it to the back plate, and reinstalled the water pump good as new. We filled the radiator from a ten-gallon water container in the back of Roland's truck. The man started his engine, and there were no leaks. We said goodbye and drove off.

A few miles down the road, Roland asked, "Did you notice the timing around their argument and the water pump going out?"

"Sure!"

"Well, if you noticed that, why didn't you tell them about it?"

"I imagine for the same reason you didn't."

"And that was?"

"Because they weren't open to looking at things that way."

"Congratulations."

"You taught me that one."

"Oh, when?"

"Don't bullshit me, Roland. You know damn well when—at the 280 Club that night when you got on me about preaching when I hadn't been asked to preach."

He smiled.

Then he said that sometimes on his days off he drove down highways looking for people to help whose cars had broken down—a road angel.



We got to Montgomery and through it. Just above Highland Home as we came around a curve at about sixty

miles per hour, the headlights exposed a herd of white-faced cattle crossing the road about fifty yards ahead, dead in our path. Cows were all over the road. I hollered, "Oh shit!!!!" and thought, Oh fuck me!!! and braced for the crash. As we entered the herd, cows turned this way or that, moved just a little forward or backward, allowing us passage. Not one so much as brushed the truck. Roland did nothing to avoid contact, no swerving, no braking, nothing.

I was shaking all over, cold sweat pouring out of me, afraid to speak.

About five minutes passed. Then I saw hovering overhead down the road what I definitely did not want to see: a glimmering spaceship headed slowly toward us. Roland said nothing, so I kept quiet, wondering what in the hell was about to happen, which was nothing. We drove right under it and just when I expected it to pick us up, it vanished.

A half-hour passed. I felt awful, wished I was home.

"That was a warm-up," Roland said, breaking the silence.

I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Warm-up for what?"

"Close your eyes and imagine that spaceship coming toward you. Whatever you do, don't avert your inner vision. Watch and listen to everything that happens—everything. Do not turn away, do you understand?"

"What if I don't want to do this? I've had enough E.T. stuff, thank you."

"It's your choice, but if you turn back now, I'm taking you home. I've waited patiently for you to get to this point, and now it's time to fish or cut bait my young, dear friend."

Now where had I heard that?

I hadn't felt like his young, dear friend for awhile, but there was no mistaking his sincerity. I was really

confused, but beyond the confusion was something huge, something compelling me to trust him.

"Okay," I said, "I'll do it."

"Then close your eyes and watch and listen, see and hear everything. Do not turn away, do not run."

The spaceship approached, silver-blue, the same color I had seen around Mom when she had crossed over. The ship changed form: a huge cottonmouth moccasin, fangs bared, mouth watering, about to swallow me. I saw the poison holes behind the fangs. Holy Mother! I'm going to throw up!

"Don't turn away!" I heard Roland through the awful roar coming out of the belly of the snake.

The fangs descended, enveloping me in a silky, spiraling cocoon, blocking out the light. Black, blacker than any black I'd ever seen. I floated in the blackness, alone. No, not alone.

There was a light, a pinprick of a light, purple white, growing larger, headed right for me, blinding, so blinding, searing my eyes, searing my brain, searing my soul.

"Don't turn from the light!" Roland yelled, far away.

So bright! I was on fire! My skin burning, then my muscles and blood, finally my bones—leaving only ashes and the darkness again—the enormous darkness.

Another light appeared, this one pure white, just as bright but it didn't hurt. In the middle of it something took shape—a yellow rosebud, slowly opening into a full-blown rose. In the middle of the bloom was a face, my face, yet not just my face, a thousand faces, all colors and shapes, and in the middle of them, the infinity symbol of the medallion, shimmering there in the light. The darkness left; the cocoon opened.

"Okay, now open your eyes, slowly," I barely heard Roland's voice.

The truck was stopped, under bright lights, a neon sign, "Motel Capri by the Sea." Nearly three hours had

passed; I was exhausted. Roland put me to bed. This time, I didn't dream.



"Riley, wake up boy, it's time to go catch us some 'nos,'" Roland's large hands shook me awake.

I squinted into bright overhead light and grumbled, "Ugh, I feel like sleeping a million years."

"No can do. It's gray light, and that's when the 'nos start feeding."

Fifteen minutes later we were out on the pier. Roland had rigged my rod with a "yellow dude," a nylon pompano jig. It was tied directly to the fresh ten-pound monofilament I had spooled onto my reel two nights before. Leaders spooked temperamental pompano.

The wind was perfect, about ten miles per hour out of the southeast, pushing medium swells into the beach, enough to stir the bottom and dislodge the pompano's favorite food: sand fleas, a small crab that sort of resembles an armadillo. I bellied up to the rail and cast out into the trough between the first and second sandbars, letting the jig sink to the bottom. Then I worked it, two gentle bumps, reel in the slack, let it sink back to the bottom, then repeat—like a sand flea dances.

The third time I bumped the jig, it bumped back. I set the hook, bending the rod double. The drag screamed, as the fish turned and raced away from the pier up the trough. I looked around. Roland and several other people had fish on, too.

A big school must have been lying in the trough, stymied by the pier. They seldom swam through the pilings, preferring to swim around in open water. So when they reached the pier, they often milled around to the east of it, feeding until they were ready to go out and around.

My fish ran off about twenty yards before the flex in my rod slowed it. Then it fought from a standstill, sideways, shaking its head. Finally, the rod pressure weakened it and I pumped it in, raising the rod slowly, then reeling in the line as I dropped the rod tip, until I had the two-pound silver beauty lying on its side in the swells directly below the pier.

I tightened the drag and reeled it up, swinging it flopping over the rail onto the deck of the pier. Pompano were jumping all over the pier. Roland had brought a plastic clothes-pin stringer tied to thirty feet of line, enough to reach down to the water from the pier railing. I strung our fish through the eye sockets and lowered them into the water where they would swim alive until we were ready to leave.

By nine o'clock we had five pompano on the stringer, a respectable catch. I caught another one about ten—pretty late in the day to hook up. Pompano didn't like bright light and usually moved into deep water by mid-morning, unless the water was milky and blocked the sunlight.

Today the water was crystal clear. I was lucky. I saw a loner—it must have been lost—streaking down the outer edge of the shallow first sandbar. Sight fishing was the most exciting way to fish for 'nos.

Once you saw one swimming—nearly impossible without Polaroid glasses that eliminated the glare on the water and let you see into it—you led it by what you figured was enough to not spook it when the jig hit the water but not so far in front that the fish wouldn't see the lure. That's how I caught the last one, and it was a thrill—making a good cast, working the dude, seeing the fish suddenly turn and take it.

We cleaned our fish at the end of the dock, put them in individual plastic bags, and took them to the room where we put them in the big ice chest Roland brought on

the trip. We filled it with ice from the motel's ice-maker, then went down the road to a cafe and had breakfast and a couple of cold beers. There was a drive-in market next door, and after eating we went in and bought a case of cold Pabst Blue Ribbons in cans, a styrofoam cooler, and a bag of ice. Then we returned to the pier. It was about one o'clock.



The pier was assaulted all afternoon by blue fish, hardtails and skipjack. Some people call hardtails, "blue runners," and skipjack, "lady fish." All three species fight like hell on light tackle, but skipjack are the most fun because of the way they take to the air as soon as they are hooked, jumping until they exhaust themselves or throw the hook. They aren't good to eat; neither are hardtails. Blues eat okay, but we didn't keep any. Why buy round steak when for the same price we had *chateaubriand*?

We had to use leaders because of the blue's vicious teeth and the skipjack's sharp gill plates. We had a lot of fun and got shit-faced drunk.

By late afternoon, we were out on the end of the pier where a big school of skipjack was congregated. We made a wager—the cost of dinner—about who could catch and release the most skipjack in the next thirty minutes. Hooking up was easy, but their hard mouths allowed most of them to throw the hook. That was probably a good thing because their gill plates cause plenty of damage to people who don't know any better—or who are drunk.

A lot of people were out there, including several families with small children, catching fish hand over fist, all having a ball. Roland, however, was pissed about losing the skipjack bet. He hooked another one and bellowed, "If that *muther* gets off, then I'm getting naked and jumping

off this pier!" Now to hear that out of the mouth of someone the size of Roland got nice folks' attention, and in no time, we had the end of the pier to ourselves.

But a problem developed. We were down to the last Blue Ribbon. I snatched it out of the cooler and climbed back up on the rail to drink it—all by myself. Before I could open it, Roland tried to grab it out of my hands.

"Give me that beer! You already had your share! That one's mine!" he bellowed, as the can slipped out of my grasp and plummeted toward the Gulf of Mexico. In solemn silence, we watched the Blue float to the bottom, like watching a good friend be lowered into the grave.

The Blue was clearly visible, shimmering on the white sand in about fifteen feet of water, rolling to and fro in the swells. We dropped our jigs down to it, thinking in our stupor that we could somehow hook the ring top and retrieve it like a pompano, which at that moment in time, it far out-valued.

Alas, it would not bite, no matter how enticingly we worked our jigs.

Finally, Roland declared, "Well, I'm just going to dive in and get the sonofabitch, swim with it to the beach and snarf it down all by myself. I just can't stand seeing a good beer go to waste, especially when you wanted it so bad for yourself!"

He started pulling off his shirt like he was about to jump in. It was then that I noticed a large shadow moving along the pier from the direction of the beach. I grabbed Roland by the back of his belt and pointed, as a monster hammerhead shark—it must have been nearly fifteen feet long—swam right over the Blue Ribbon, out to sea.

Wide-eyed Roland looked at me and exclaimed, "Shit a brick, did you see that monster that just about knocked down this pier? Let's go get some more beer!"

And off we went, but by the time we reached the end of the pier, all I had energy to do was to stumble over to the motel room and collapse into bed.



I woke up about nine o'clock, my head splitting from too much sun and beer. Roland was not in the room. I took two aspirin, opened the front door, and spotted him at the end of the parking lot, watching the surf roll in. I called out. He walked back, we got in his truck, and drove down to the Blue Room in Destin.

We started with a plate of blue crab claws and a pitcher of draft beer—hangover medicine—followed by a dinner of fresh scamp. As we finished eating, a country-western band came in and started playing. The place quickly filled with locals. The tourist season didn't start until the end of the month when schools in Alabama let out. Roland danced with several women, while I watched and thought.

On the way back to the Capri I asked why he had never married.

"Riley, everybody comes into life with certain things to do. Right now it doesn't look like getting married is in the cards for me. That might change in time, but that's how it looks now, so I don't do a whole lot of worrying about it. No doubt, if I ever start thinking seriously about marriage, I will worry plenty about it then because a marriage can really change a person's life. You and Mary Lou have had it pretty easy so far, but I think you might be in for some interesting times after that baby comes, perhaps even before."

I wanted to ask him about other things but decided to wait.



We caught four more 'nos the next morning, then packed up and started home.

Driving north over Chotawahatchee Bay, Roland asked, "Did you enjoy this fishing trip?"

"Which part?"

"The fishing part."

"I sure did!"

"Did you enjoy it as much as preaching?"

"Yeah, at least as much."

Then he was quiet.

We rode about a half-hour in silence, then I asked one of the questions I had been wanting to ask.

"Roland, what's been your role in my development?"

He chuckled, then said, "I'm the one assigned to kick your butt every time it needs kicking, make you feel awful every time you need to feel awful, wake you up every time you fall asleep, and be your friend when you need a friend, because in this line of work, as you have found, true friends are few and far between."

"You can say that again!"

"Riley, there's something you need to know before we get home, something about Mary Lou."

I felt my gut tighten.

"It's not what you think. There's nothing between us. That thing that happened at Auburn, there was more to that than meets the eye. For one thing, your relationship needed to be tested before you started having children. For another, well, all I'll say right now is that it awakened something in her. I was the only one who knew how to make it happen, so I decided to do it. Don't worry, she loves you, my boy."

"Does she know about this?"

"Nope. And you need to keep quiet about it so she can get acquainted with it in her own way when she's ready. In time you both will benefit from it."

Before I could say more, Roland changed the subject.

"Riley, you need to think about your preaching. It's very important."

"Can you tell me anything else about that?"

"I could, but I won't."

"I've got another question."

"Shoot."

"You knew I was alive over there, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I knew, but I didn't tell Mary Lou I knew."

I said nothing.

He continued.

"Riley, you've learned much, but you still have a lot to learn about appearances not having much to do with reality. Take those cows we saw when we were coming down. Do you think it was an accident that they were out in the road? Do you think it was just luck that we didn't hit one or more of them and flip this truck?"

I didn't know what to say.

"And something really important happened out there on that pier."

"What was it?"

"Why don't you think about it?"

My thoughts drifted to the afternoon before. The hammerhead came right after Roland cleared the other people off the end of the pier. If he had gone in after the beer, then nobody but me would have seen him drinking beer with a shark. Damn!



Heartblood

Mary Lou knew she was pregnant, but she mainly wanted to know how I felt about being a father. I was kind of in favor of it, but worried about how she could be a mother and a vet at the same time.

"Riley, it won't be any problem if I bring my practice home. I'll take a little time off around the birth, but otherwise I'll do just fine. I'll rig the baby up like a papoose and carry her around with me."

"Uh, how do you know it's going to be a *her*?"

"Oh, just a hunch."

I knew enough about her hunches not to argue.

The next Sunday, I told the congregation about receiving a higher calling the previous Sunday—going fishing with an old friend with whom I hadn't been getting along too well. A few of the people said they felt stood up.

"I appreciate that, I really do," I said, "but if I hadn't gone fishing with my friend, then he would have felt stood up by me and perhaps we never would have healed the rift between us. Now what do you think is more important for a preacher—or anybody, for that matter: to heal a broken friendship or to preach?"

"From time to time you have to make choices that some people may never understand but you know you have to make them anyway. Well, this was one of those times in my life, and it wasn't the only such decision I've made this week."

"My wife, Mary Lou, is going to have a baby. She's a veterinarian and wants to continue her vet work at home. So I've got to build her a clinic on our property, and I've got to start now because she wants to have it up and running before the baby comes. So this will be our last meeting, unless you folks want to continue this church on your own, which is fine with me. After all, nobody owns it and if it is supposed to continue, it will. If not, it won't."

I offered that anyone who wanted to talk about things could drop by our place for a visit. If I was busy with something, they could get busy with me, wait until I was finished, or come back another time.

A few of them didn't like it, said they felt abandoned. So I said, "Some of you may think this is bad right now but someday you will understand that the worst thing that could happen would be for you to get so attached to me that you can't figure things out for yourselves.

"Just look around you at all the church-going people you know. Most of them go to church to hear comforting words about Jesus, about how he died to save them, about how he's coming back to fetch them someday, about how all they have to do to be eternally happy is to be baptized and believe in him. They bet their entire lives on a messiah and never understand that their messiah is an illusion, a childish fantasy, no different than the fairytales about Prince Charming coming to rescue the fair young maiden in distress—or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Nobody's ever found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow because that's not where the gold is. The gold is in the rainbow itself, and the only way to find it is to walk it, every day of your life.

"I try to live *my* life and not the one that other people want me to live. That is what I have tried to teach you in this curious church that challenges every idea people have about churches, including the one that going

to church is going to somehow save you. The only way you can be saved is to find the church in yourself. I love you and hope we can remain friends, but go I must."

The bucket held \$2,500 at the end of the service, which the folks at Brother Bryan's were, as usual, happy to receive. I told them I was through preaching—there probably wouldn't be any more money for a while. They thanked me for what I had done and said they would tell the others at the mission.

When I returned home, Roland was there with a bunch of boys from the Ranch, clearing underbrush.

"Figured you guys could use some help getting this place ready for Mary Lou's clinic," he said. "It'll do these kids good to be around you and Mary Lou. They need to be around some almost-awake people so they can see that what I've been telling them about life is not a figment of my imagination."

I didn't reply to that but said instead, "Roland, I figured out the hammerhead. Sorry I was so slow. Thanks for helping me see."

He looked at me, then burst into tears. Then I started crying. We just stood there crying, while the boys from the Ranch and Mary Lou watched, wondering what in the hell had gotten into us.

After I quit crying, I asked, "Roland, aren't you supposed to give me back that template with the hieroglyphics on it?"

"Why should I do that?"

"Well, doesn't it carry some important message?"

"Riley, you took the short cut. You don't need that map anymore. If you had followed it, you would have gone off on a wild goose chase to a place a lot farther off than Ishkooda. One day you would have waked up and realized what you had done. Then you would have come begging home, hoping to find Mary Lou waiting for you. Most likely, though, you wouldn't have liked what you found."

After they left, I explained it all to Mary Lou.



That night over dinner I told Mary Lou I had quit preaching. When she got up to clear the table, I went out to give the food scraps to the animals.

As I walked up the steps back into the house, I was seized by the worst searing pain I had ever felt in my life, worse than when Roland had kneed me in the head and collarbone when he taught me how to block, worse even than the time I got kicked in the balls playing touch football during lunch break at Shades Valley High School my freshman year.

A giant claw crushed my heart, forcing all the air out of my lungs. I thudded to the wooden floor of the porch, loud enough for Mary Lou to hear.

"Riley, what's happening?!" she yelled, shaking my shoulders.

I couldn't respond. It was all I could do to breathe.

Roland and the ambulance arrived about the same time. I heard the young resident in the emergency room at University Hospital tell the nurses it was a severe heart attack. They wouldn't let Roland in to see me, but Mary Lou, being my wife, was able to force her way in.

"Riley, can you hear me?" she loudly asked.

I blinked my eyes. "Yes."

"Roland says this is not what it looks like. You have got to be on your toes tonight! Otherwise, you might not live through it. Do you understand?"

I blinked again.

I saw the doctor look at Mary Lou like she was deranged.

Under the medication, staying awake was hard. The best I could manage was a trance-like state. After about ten minutes, it began.

I saw the image of a spider web with a large black widow spider in the middle. I felt the web stretched across the front of my chest, anchored to my ribs. The spider was right over my heart. Light came into my heart from the outside but the web funneled it to the spider, who was eating most of it, letting past just enough to keep me, and thus the spider, alive.

As I watched the spider, the web tightened around my chest. The pain returned, overriding the medication. The spider knew that I knew she was there, that I knew she had been there all my life, that I knew who she was and why she was doing it.

I thought to myself, God, why does it have to end like this? Why can't it be different? Why do I have to cast her out, too? I don't know if I can live without you! Can't you stay with me *and* let me live my own life? I don't want to preach anymore. I just want to fix things, raise vegetables, go fishing, have a family. That's what I really like to do!

But the web tightened, and I heard the nurse at the monitoring station summon the doctor.

"Don't take your eyes off her!" warned Roland's distant voice—or did I just imagine it?

The pain increased. I watched her, gave her my heart. Eat it, if that's what you have to do, I thought. You can have it, but you can't have my soul. Oh, Mom, you do not know what you do! Or do you? Does it really matter? Is what you do my job to judge? All I can do is be me, which means, Mom, you've got to go, *NOW!!!!*

And there it was: her face replaced the spider; her hair, the web.

"I think he's stabilized," the doctor sighed.

"Don't take your eyes off her," Roland's voice warned.

The scene changed. I'm in Mom's bedroom. We have just finished drinking the liquid from the amber container. She says, "Riley, it's important to share with others what you have learned about life. I don't feel that I completed doing that and it's my dying wish that you continue my work." Dad suddenly appears beside her. He frowns, shaking his head "no." He says something into her ear, but she does not hear him—does not want to hear him.

She says again with her eyes what she can no longer say with words. Then she becomes naked, motioning me to her, to make love to her. I gag and nearly throw up. Shaking but determined, I cup the back of her head with my fingers and press my thumbs into each of her eyes, pushing deep into her brain, bursting the membrane. Cerebrospinal fluid and blood ooze out of her eye sockets, down my thumbs, over my wrists. I drop her lifeless body onto her bed.

The bluish mist returns, a bright light shining through. Before my astounded eyes, Mom's body turns into a huge cottonmouth moccasin. Then it grows wings, beautiful wings, and changes into a beautiful, golden dragon. It arches its neck, stretches its glorious wings and turns away from me, beckoning me to mount and ride it into the light.



"Good morning, Riley," Mary Lou said as I opened my eyes.

"Uh, good morning to you, lovely thing. What day is it?"

"Saturday."

"I've been out that long?"

"Yep."

"Man, have I got an interesting story to tell you!"

"Riley, all your stories are interesting, but I'm wondering if just for a while we can go back to living like we did down at Auburn, you know, like we're ordinary?"

"That is yet to be decided; don't start acting like his mother, Mary Lou!" Roland's voice boomed from the doorway.

When he released me two days later, the doctor said he had never seen anything like it. I had come in under cardiac arrest and near death, yet the electrocardiogram taken the day before showed no signs of heart failure. I was in perfect health as far as he could tell.

I smiled, thanked him for his help, and walked out of the hospital arm-in-arm with Roland and Mary Lou.

Parting Words

When All-American Pat Trammel contracted cancer after graduating from Alabama medical school up in Birmingham, Coach Bryant went up to the University Hospital after the surgery. He tried to cheer Pat up—said he'd be back on his feet soon.

"They cleaned me out, Coach," Pat replied, meaning his surgeons had removed his testicles in their futile attempts to save his life. Coach Bryant was crushed: Pat was like a son to him.



In 1970, old Ely died quietly at his daughter's home in Powderly. He was ninety-three, they said, but nobody was really sure how old he was because he was born down south of Demopolis, way back when nobody got a birth certificate. But the U.S. Census people came around every ten years and counted heads, and so Ely knew within ten years how old he was.

Roland, Mary Lou and I dressed up in our Sunday best and drove over to Powderly for the church funeral. Over a thousand people must have been there, all black except for the three of us. Racial tension still ran pretty high, but those people were as nice to us as could be, and

the preacher right off said a friendly welcome to "our white brothers and sister."

Then he talked for an hour about Ely—the man, the father, grandfather and great-grandfather, the yard man, and, finally, which surprised the hell out of Mary Lou and me, but of course Roland already knew about it, Ely the behind-the-scenes black leader in the civil rights movement for all of Birmingham.

After that, the minister led the congregation in an old-fashioned "singing," which if you've never been around one, well, it's quite something to witness. Everyone there got all worked up, wailing, crying, shouting, laughing—why, having just about every feeling a human being can have. A damn good way, in my opinion, to honor the passing of a man of God—St. Ely of the Bogey Man.

After the service, Mary Lou sat down on the front steps of the church with about a dozen of Ely's progeny, and they all had themselves a good family cry.



After his 10-0 team was crushed by Nebraska in the 1971 Orange Bowl, costing the Bear another national championship, he concluded that the Crimson Tide could no longer compete on a national level with only white players. So he signed his first black player, John Mitchell, a junior college transfer defensive end who played two years at Alabama, finishing as a college all-American.

Thus did the Bear Jesus do more to break down racial barriers in Alabama and the South—because all other Southern high school and college coaches followed his lead—than the American Civil War, the civil rights laws, the United States Supreme Court and Department of Justice, and Martin Luther King, Jr., all combined. If any other white man had tried to do it, he would have been

lynched. But Crimson Tide fans wouldn't have stood for that after the Bear made their weenies feel bigger.



The Bear's heavy boozing went on for years, and finally, he had a mild heart attack. After that, his teams' performance began a downward slide, and to his credit, he saw the handwriting on the wall and surprised everybody by announcing his retirement from coaching in 1982. Soon afterward he had another heart attack that took his life.

His ardent followers then searched high and low for another "Bear," another waterwalker. First was Ray Perkins, an all-American split-end under Bryant; then Bill Curry, an all-pro center under Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers. Poor bastards, they never could make Crimson Tide fans feel adequate.

Bear worshippers now hope Gene Stallings, who looks and talks like Coach Bryant and walks like John Wayne, is the second incarnation of "the Bear," the messiah whose return will make Tide weenies feel bigger than everyone else's.



Well, that's enough about football and weenies. Besides, there's a whole lot more to this tale than that. To wrap up a couple of other loosely important ends, I will close by sharing two bizarre dreams I had the night after I went home from the hospital.

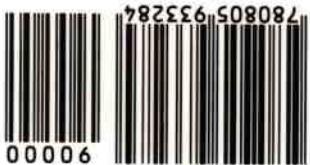
In the first dream, I was driving with Roland in my truck up U.S. 280 toward Birmingham. As we crossed the bridge where Mary Lou and I used to throw carp and suckers at cars, an evil-grinning, fifteen-foot hammerhead

shark arched through the air from the right side of the road, headed right for the front of my pickup. Just before it kersplatted into the grill and became a year's supply of cat food, it changed into a beautiful white sperm whale hood ornament.

In the second dream, Moses stood in front of me wearing a white robe, holding a long, stretched-out cottonmouth moccasin—oops, or was it his staff?—in his right hand, and two stone tablets hinged together like an open-face sandwich in his left hand. As I peered at the tablets to see what was written on them, to my great shock, old white-haired Moses turned into the red man himself, holding a pitchfork in his right hand and the Bible open to the Garden of Eden story in his left!

When I pulled back, Satan changed back into Moses, and boy, was he embarrassed that I had seen who he really was! I pinned a yellow rosebud on the left shoulder of his robe, and at that moment a beautiful white dove flew down and landed on his right shoulder. Presto, he turned back into Satan and wept. Not knowing what else to do, I asked if he wanted to go fishing.

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Moses

Hee, Hee, Hee!
Just as I planned it!
All fouled up—
Situation normal,
Life's been:
And ever since,
Eve and the snake,
Adam and God blamed

SNAFU

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